PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 463 (Part 1)

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2006–2007

COMPRISING PERIOD
16 July 2007—1 October 2007

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(Formed by the Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, MP, June 2007)

Prime Minister, First Lord Of The Treasury And Minister For The Civil Service—The Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, MP
Chancellor Of The Exchequer—The Rt. Hon. Alistair Darling, MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—The Rt. Hon. David Miliband, MP
Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor—The Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department—The Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith, MP
Secretary of State for Defence and Secretary of State for Scotland—The Rt. Hon. Des Browne, MP
Secretary of State for Health—The Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson, MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—The Rt. Hon. Hilary Benn, MP
Secretary of State for International Development—The Rt. Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP
Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform—The Rt. Hon. John Hutton, MP
Leader of the House of Commons, Lord Privy Seal and Minister for Women—The Rt. Hon. Harriet Harman, QC, MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Secretary of State for Wales—The Rt. Hon. Peter Hain, MP
Secretary of State for Transport—The Rt. Hon. Ruth Kelly, MP
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government—The Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears, MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Hoon, MP
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families—The Rt. Hon. Ed Balls, MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—The Rt. Hon. Edward Miliband, MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—The Rt. Hon. James Purnell, MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—The Rt. Hon. Shaun Woodward, MP
Leader of the House of Lords and Lord President of the Council—The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Ashton of Upholland
Chief Secretary to the Treasury—The Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham, MP
Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills—The Rt. Hon. John Denham, MP
Captain of the Honourable Corps of Gentleman-at-Arms—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Grocott

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform—

Secretary of State—The Rt. Hon. John Hutton, MP

Ministers of State—
Minister for Competitiveness—The Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms, Esq, MP
Minister for Trade Promotion and Investment—The Lord Jones of Birmingham
Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs—Pat McFadden, Esq, MP
Minister for Energy—Malcolm Wicks, MP
Minister for Business and Regulatory Reform—The Lord Drayson

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State—
Gareth Thomas, Esq, MP

Cabinet Office—

Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—The Rt. Hon. Edward Miliband, MP

Minister of State—
Minister for the Olympics and London (Paymaster General)—The Rt. Hon. Tessa Jowell, MP*

Parliamentary Secretaries—
Phil Hope, MP
Gillian Merron, MP (Minister for the East Midlands)*

Children, Schools and Families—

Secretary of State— The Rt. Hon. Ed Balls, MP

Ministers of State—
Minister for Schools and Learners—Jim Knight, MP
Minister for Children, Young People and Families (Minister for the North West)—The Rt. Hon. Beverley Hughes, MP*

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Kevin Brennan, MP
The Lord Adonis

Communities and Local Government—

Secretary of State—The Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears, MP

Ministers of State—
Minister for Housing—Yvette Cooper, MP
Minister for Local Government—John Healey, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
The Baroness Andrews, OBE
Parmjit Dhanda, Esq, MP
Iain Wright, Esq, MP

Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. James Purnell, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—
The Rt. Hon. Margaret Hodge, MP, MBE

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—
Gerry Sutcliffe, Esq, MP

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Des Browne, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for the Armed Forces—The Rt. Hon. Bob Ainsworth, MP
Minister for Defence Equipment and Support—The Lord Drayson

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—
Derek Twigg, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for Sustainable Food and Farming and Animal Health—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Rooker
Minister for the Environment—Phil Woolas, Esq, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Joan Ruddock, MP
Jonathan Shaw, MP (Minister for the South East)*

Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. David Miliband, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for Europe—Jim Murphy, Esq, MP
Minister for the Middle East—Dr. Kim Howells, MP
The Rt. Hon. The Lord Malloch-Brown, KCMG
The Lord Jones of Birmingham

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—
Meg Munn, MP

Health—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt. Hon. Dawn Primarolo, MP
Ben Bradshaw, Esq, MP (Minister for the South West)*

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
The Lord Darzi of Denham, KBE
Ann Keen, MP
Ivan Lewis, Esq, MP

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Tony McNulty, Esq, MP
Liam Byrne, Esq, MP (Minister for the West Midlands)*

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Vernon Coaker, Esq, MP
Admiral The Lord West of Spithead, GCB DSC
Meg Hillier, MP

Innovation, Universities and Skills—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. John Denham, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education—Bill Rammell, MP
Minister for Science and Innovation—Ian Pearson, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
David Lammy, Esq, MP
The Lord Triesman

International Development—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Gareth Thomas, Esq, MP
The Baroness Vadera
Shahid Malik, Esq, MP

Justice—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Jack Straw, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt. Hon. David Hanson, Esq, MP
Michael Wills, Esq, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
The Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, OBE
Bridget Prentice, MP
Maria Eagle, MP

Law Officers' Department—
ATTORNEY-GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Scotland of Asthal, QC
SOLICITOR-GENERAL—Vera Baird, QC, MP
ADVOCATE-GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Lord Davidson of Glen Cova, QC

Leader of the House of Commons—
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, LORD PRIVY SEAL AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN—The Rt. Hon. Harriet Harman, QC, MP
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—Helen Goodman, MP

Northern Ireland—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Shaun Woodward, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—
Paul Goggins, MP

Privy Council Office—
LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt. Hon. The Baroness Ashton of Upholland

Scotland Office—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Des Browne, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—
David Cairns, MP

Transport—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Ruth Kelly, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—
The Rt. Hon. Rosie Winterton, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Jim Fitzpatrick, MP
Tom Harris, Esq, MP

Treasury—
PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt. Hon. Alistair Darling, MP
CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham, MP
FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt. Hon. Jane Kennedy, MP
EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Angela Eagle, MP
ECONOMIC SECRETARY—Kitty Ussher, MP
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Hoon, MP
LORDS COMMISSIONERS—
Frank Roy, Esq, MP
Steve McCabe, MP
Alan Campbell, Esq, MP
Dave Watts, Esq, MP
Claire Ward, MP
ASSISTANT WHIPS—
Siobhain McDonagh, MP
Michael Foster, Esq, MP
Tony Cunningham, MP
Alison Seabeck, MP
Ms Diana R. Johnson, MP
Mark Tami, MP
Sadiq Khan, Esq, MP
Bob Blizzard, Esq, MP
Tom Watson, Esq, MP

Wayne David, Esq, MP

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Peter Hain, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—
Huw Irranca-Davies, MP

Work and Pensions—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt. Hon. Peter Hain, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Minister for Pensions Reform—Mike O'Brien, Esq, MP
Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform (Minister for Yorkshire and the Humber)—Caroline Flint, MP*

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Anne McGuire, MP
James Plaskitt, Esq, MP
The Lord McKenzie of Luton
Barbara Follett, MP (Minister for the East of England and Minister for Women)*

Her Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt. Hon. The Earl Peel, GCVO, DL

LORD STEWARD—The Duke of Abercorn, KG

MASTER OF THE HORSE—The Lord Vestey

TREASURER—The Rt. Hon. Nicholas Brown, MP (Minister for the North East of England)*

COMPTROLLER—The Rt. Hon. Thomas McAvoy, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Liz Blackman, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMAN-AT-ARMS—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Grocott

CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMAN OF THE GUARD—The Rt. Hon. The Lord Davies of Oldham

LORDS IN WAITING—The Lord Bassam of Brighton, The Lord Evans of Temple Guiting, CBE, The Lord Truscott

BARONESSES IN WAITING—The Baroness Farrington of Ribbleton, The Baroness Crawley, The Baroness Royall of Blaisdon, The Baroness Morgan of Drefelin

**Regional Ministers. Full list:*

Ministers for the English Regions—

Ben Bradshaw, Esq, MP (Minister for the South West)
The Rt. Hon. Nicholas Brown, MP (Minister for the North East of England)
Liam Byrne, Esq, MP (Minister for the West Midlands)
Caroline Flint, MP (Minister for Yorkshire and the Humber)
Barbara Follett, MP (Minister for the East of England)
The Rt. Hon. Beverley Hughes, MP (Minister for the North West)
The Rt. Hon. Tessa Jowell, MP (Minister for the Olympics and London)
Gillian Merron, MP (Minister for the East Midlands)
Jonathan Shaw, MP (Minister for the South East)

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Sir Stuart Bell, MP

HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt. Hon. Michael J. Martin, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Mrs. Sylvia Heal, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Sir Michael Lord, MP

CHAIRMEN'S PANEL

David Amess, Janet Anderson, Peter Atkinson, Hugh Bayley, Anne Begg, Joe Benton, John Bercow, Sir John Butterfill, Martin Caton, Christopher Chope, Derek Conway, Frank Cook, John Cummings, Janet Dean, Roger Gale, Mike Hancock, Jim Hood, Joan Humble, Eric Illsley, Martyn Jones, Dr. William McCrea, David Marshall, Eric Martlew, Edward O'Hara, Bill Olner, Greg Pope, David Taylor, Mike Weir, Hywel Williams, David Wilshire, Ann Winterton, Sir Nicholas Winterton

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The Rt. Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Sir Stuart Bell, MP, The Rt. Hon. Harriet Harman, QC, MP, Nick Harvey, MP, The Rt. Hon. David Maclean, MP, The Rt. Hon. Mrs. Theresa May, MP

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Andrew Kennon

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Jenny McCullough

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE

The Rt. Hon. Mrs. Theresa May, MP (Chairman), Nick Harvey, MP, Sir Thomas Legg, KCB, QC, David Taylor, FCA

SECRETARY OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE—Tracey Garratty

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

Malcolm Jack, PhD (Chief Executive), Helen Irwin (Clerk of Committees, Department of the Clerk of the House), Peter Grant Peterkin, CB, OBE (Serjeant at Arms), John Pullinger (Librarian), Andrew Walker (Director of Finance and Administration), Lorraine Sutherland (Editor of the Official Report), Sue Harrison (Director of Catering Services), Joan Miller (Director of Parliamentary ICT)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT—Robert Twigger

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—Angus Sinclair

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—John Vaux

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Canon Robert Wright

MEDICAL ADVISER TO THE SPEAKER—Dr. Ron Zeegen, OBE, FRCP, MRCS, DObst, RCOG

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Sir Philip Mawer

PARLIAMENTARY SECURITY CO-ORDINATOR—Peter Mason

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 11 MAY 2005]

FIFTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 463**

ELEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2006-2007

House of Commons

Monday 16 July 2007

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ACCOUNTS OF THE CONTINGENCIES FUND

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Accounts of the Contingencies fund, 2006-07, showing:—

(1) a balance sheet;

(2) a cashflow statement and;

(3) notes to the account; together with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—*[Mr. Roy.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mental Health

1. **Mr. Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on mental health support services for members of the armed forces. [149372]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Derek Twigg): With permission, I should like to make a short statement before answering the question. I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending sincere condolences to the family and friends of Guardsman Daryl Hickey, who was killed by small arms fire in Helmand province Afghanistan on Thursday 12 July.

Defence medical services mental health staff deploy on major operations to provide assessment and care to personnel in theatre. In the UK, community-based mental health care is available at 15 Ministry of Defence-run regional departments of community mental health, plus satellite centres overseas, while in-patient care, when necessary, is provided regionally in specialised psychiatric units under a contract with the Priory group.

Mr. Crabb: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply and join him in paying tribute to Guardsman Daryl Hickey, whose courage and sacrifice should not be forgotten.

Given the numbers of service personnel returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with mental health traumas ranging from depression and anxiety to post-traumatic stress disorder, and given that there may be many more whose conditions could take years to manifest themselves, does the Minister agree that unless measures are taken now substantially to expand the provision of a dedicated Army mental health specialist team, rather than just relying on NHS and voluntary-sector provision, important as they both may be, Britain risks facing a mental health time bomb in the decades ahead among soldiers and veterans?

Derek Twigg: The support that is given pre- and post-deployment is quite significant, in terms of advice, including on what signs serving personnel should look for. There is also good support in theatre, with psychiatric support and even a visiting consultant. There is significantly greater awareness these days of mental health problems and a greater ability to talk about them. As I said in my answer, we also have departments of community mental health care throughout the country and significant support, if needed, via the Priory unit.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk) (Lab): Have my hon. Friend or any of his right hon. Friends at the Ministry of Defence had any contact with the organisation Combat Stress? If so, have they had a chance to discuss its future funding?

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Combat Stress is obviously an excellent organisation and it does a superb job in supporting those who develop mental health problems, often later on, after leaving service. We funded it last year to the tune of £2.9 million and we are in discussions this year to give it a significant increase in its funding.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, my own former battalion. It is having a desperately difficult time, with so many of its guardsmen coming home injured or, sadly, dead.

The Minister is aware that soldiers are disproportionately represented among the homeless, especially in London. What is the Ministry of Defence doing to go out and see how many soldiers are homeless and living rough, and what are we doing to alleviate the problem?

Derek Twigg: A study conducted recently of former armed forces personnel showed that there has been a substantial drop in rough sleepers in London. Also, we have a number of schemes throughout the country, in Yorkshire and Aldershot—we are also looking at Colchester—to provide spaces for homeless service personnel and to work with them. In addition, the Compass scheme in London works with the Royal British Legion and does an excellent job. I have visited the scheme and talked to a number of the ex-soldiers and RAF personnel there, who were full of praise for the work and the support that the scheme had given them, not only by providing them with accommodation, but by helping them to get back into work and in some cases start up their own businesses.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): My hon. Friend must be aware that we have to learn lessons from the Falklands war, the Gulf war and every other conflict, in that the support from mental health services has not been there. That support has also not been seamless for the people who have left the services. What will he do to ensure that that neglect does not continue and that support is provided not only while people are in the services, but when they leave?

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are clearly lessons to be learned from the past. There is a lot more knowledge these days about mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder, and about the ways in which we approach these matters. We have been looking into a number of ways of improving the system for former armed forces personnel, including better funding for Combat Stress, the extension of the medical assessment programme that I announced a few weeks ago—which will go back to include the 1982 veterans of the Falklands—and the reservist mental health scheme for those who are deployed in Iraq. We are also looking at a new pilot scheme involving the Ministry of Defence, the health services and Combat Stress that will develop centres of excellence to support those who develop a mental illness as a result of their service in the armed forces.

Wounded Service Personnel

2. **Mr. Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on care for servicemen and women who have been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. [149373]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Des Browne): We provide an excellent level of care for our service personnel who have been wounded on operations. This includes: life-saving emergency care in the front line, in our field hospitals and in NHS hospitals in the UK; the excellent facilities at the defence medical rehabilitation centre and our regional rehabilitation units; and treatment for those whose mental health has been affected.

Mr. Benyon: As the wounded come to terms with the consequences of their injuries, their thoughts turn to issues such as housing, and to whether they will be allowed to remain in the armed forces, and if not, to what provision exists to assist them in moving into civilian life. Will the Secretary of State give the House an assurance that everything that can be done for our wounded—many of whom have severe disabilities—is being done in respect of informing them of their entitlements and providing assistance in getting back into civilian life? Will he also give his support to any civic or community group that recognises the heroism and sacrifice of these injured servicemen as they try to return to their civilian lives?

Des Browne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's assessment of our responsibility to those who return injured from theatres of combat. He will know that, because of the advances that have been made in rehabilitative care, such people are increasingly able to continue with their Army careers. That is a function not only of advances in clinical care and rehabilitation processes but of the way in which the services interact with those people. Caseworkers are involved, as is a programme known as pathway care, which is doing work in this area. In all these programmes, we work with the voluntary sector and other agencies including local authorities and the NHS, and I have no difficulty in giving the hon. Gentleman the commitment that he asks for—namely, that we will continue to do so. He also asks for a reassurance that everything that can be done is being done. I cannot give him that reassurance, because I am absolutely certain that we will find ways of improving what we have already improved as we proceed along these lines, and we intend to do that.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): I recognise the fantastic work that is being delivered by the NHS at Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham. The introduction of military-managed wards has been very much welcomed by our service personnel. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that such wards will be the norm, so that our service personnel will have the support of their comrades at these difficult times?

Des Browne: I assure my hon. Friend that we are pleased with the progress that has been made on the military-managed ward at Selly Oak hospital. That hospital treats our casualties in a world-class way, and I am pleased that, at least in regard to clinical care, that

view is shared by those on all the Front Benches in the House. There has been some debate about whether we could improve the environment in which injured military personnel could recuperate, and we have made improvements in that regard. So much so, in fact, that General Sir Richard Dannatt, the Chief of the General Staff, said in March:

"There is nowhere better in the country, nowhere more expert at polytrauma medicine, than that hospital in Selly Oak. That's why our people are there."

I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will learn from those lessons to ensure that we continue to improve.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): Would the Secretary of State accept that it is a great failing of the Ministry of Defence that more is not known about the great triumph, success and heroism of British soldiers, particularly those who have been seriously wounded? Will he note the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) about the need for the wider community to recognise the astonishing achievements and heroism of the wounded? Does not he agree that they should be invited to race meetings, motor racing, boxing fights, and so on, so that people can see them, welcome them and give them appropriate recognition for their astonishing achievements?

Des Browne: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am pleased to advise the House, and those who might have missed this, that a significant number of those who have been injured in combat were recently guests of, I think, the British Motor Racing Club—I shall almost certainly get this wrong, and I do not want to—at the recent Formula 1 race. Whoever it was—and I should know exactly who invited them—is to be commended for their generosity and for their reasons for choosing to honour those people.

May I say to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that I regret the change made some time ago—there were reasons for it—whereby soldiers, airmen and sailors who are off duty do not appear in uniform on our streets? If more of our armed services were able to appear in uniform, people would have a better chance of relating to them. If I can increase the numbers who are able to do that, it will go a long way to address the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. David S. Borrow (South Ribble) (Lab): With the best will in the world, it is inevitable that not all servicemen and women injured in combat can be treated in military-run wards. Some will be placed in civilian-run wards because that is the best place for them to be. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, when soldiers are placed in civilian-run wards, they will receive the sort of care that is appropriate for individuals who have been injured in combat? Will recognition be given to the special nature of the trauma and difficulties that they have gone through in receiving their injuries, as that can be very different from injuries sustained in civilian life?

Des Browne: My hon. Friend is right in identifying the challenge that we would face if we had to bring in all those in the services receiving in-patient treatment, as they would barely fill two hospital wards on any typical day. In those circumstances, it is impossible to imagine how the re-establishment of a military hospital, for example, could provide the excellence of clinical care that those people would receive in NHS hospitals. A relevant example is the opportunity to bring 16 trauma specialists to one bedside in Selly Oak hospital—that cannot be done anywhere else. We continually address the challenge of generating the environment that is commensurate with the circumstances that have caused the injuries to these young men—and it is young men more often than not. I will do everything I can to ensure that we continue down the path that we have embarked upon.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): As we have discussed in the House before, better body armour inevitably produces fewer fatalities, but more disabilities than in previous conflicts. The concept of the MOD's duty of care therefore needs to extend more than ever beyond the time actually served in the military. It needs to extend to those with chronic disability, in the knowledge that the NHS will give them—whatever the effects on targets—the priority that they deserve. Those with psychiatric damage need to know that the appropriate military psychiatric help will be available years later when it is needed. Why, unlike in the US, do we still have no guidelines on traumatic brain injury? Does the Secretary of State understand how unacceptable it is to the House when we read in yesterday's papers about a young man, Lance-Corporal Twiddy, who said:

"Once you are discharged, the MOD doesn't want anything to do with you"?

That is utterly unacceptable.

Des Browne: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand why I shall desist from responding to the circumstances of one particular individual, but he has my assurance that I will personally look into the circumstances of the young man whom he identified and find out whether that was the case—if so, I will do everything I can to see that it is no longer the case for that individual.

On the more general issue of traumatic brain injury, we are studying developments in the US: as we speak there is a liaison officer out there and we want to learn from what the US has done. The hon. Gentleman has a medical background and training that I do not have, so I am not in a position to assess that, but I rely on others to do it for me. Recently, evidence from the US has shown that, when it comes to the care of veterans, they have something to learn from us, too.

Armed Forces (RSA Citizens)

3. **Bob Russell** (Colchester) (LD): How many citizens of the Republic of South Africa are serving in the armed forces. [149375]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): At the end of the last financial year, approximately 900 South African citizens were serving in the UK regular armed forces.

Bob Russell: With approximately 10 per cent. of the British Army not being British, I am sure that the whole House is grateful to the thousands of young men and women—mainly from Commonwealth countries,

but from a total of 57 countries—who are serving in Her Majesty's armed forces. As to South Africa, is the Minister satisfied that, as a result of South African Government legislation, South African citizens will still be able to serve in the British armed forces?

Mr. Ainsworth: We are aware of problems with the proposed legislation in South Africa and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has spoken to the South African Minister of Defence on the telephone and written to him about it. The result of those conversations provides some degree of reassurance about what the South African Government intended to do. However, we are not there yet and nothing is pinned down. We are still concerned, as are the people directly concerned. We are trying to keep them informed of the situation and if there are any developments we most certainly will inform them.

Iraq

4. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford) (Lab): What progress he has made in withdrawing troops from Iraq. [149376]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Des Browne): From a peak of about 45,000 personnel deployed to Iraq during major combat operations in 2003, we have drawn down progressively to 8,000 prior to handing over three of our four provinces. Since then, we have reduced in stages to 5,500. The commanders on the ground assess that that is the right number of troops to discharge our current responsibilities. As I have made clear, we expect to see further reductions as we hand over to the Iraqi security forces in Basra city.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, I welcome recent troop withdrawals and look forward to more soon. My question is about the safety of troops during withdrawal. Is a transitional period between active patrols and returning home envisaged, during which troops will be, as it were, confined to barracks? Will that be at the Basra air base? As I am sure he is aware, that base is subject to dozens of rocket attacks every day. If there must be such a transitional period, could our troops be safely elsewhere in the region but close enough to be on call if needed?

Des Browne: It is not envisaged that our troops will be confined to barracks, as it were, at any time. Operational decisions in relation to force protection are a matter for commanders. Invariably, such operations, which are known as layered, include attempts to interdict those who try to attack the base. I reassure my hon. Friend that no effort is spared to ensure that the best possible protection is provided to our forces deployed on operations. In the last year alone, we have invested millions of pounds in new equipment, including body armour and armoured vehicles. In relation to indirect fire—IDF—a number of kinetic and static capabilities have been deployed better to protect our personnel from such attacks. For reasons of operational security, I cannot elaborate on that or on the equipment employed. Unfortunately, however, the effects of indirect fire attacks can never be mitigated completely. We ought to expect those to continue in the current environment.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, the Defence Committee was in Iraq last week, and we were bowled over by the courage and enthusiasm of the men and women from the UK whom we met. Does he agree that there is a judgment to be made about the viability of our force there? Given what is happening there at the moment, does he agree that we are now close to the irreducible minimum?

Des Browne: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for sharing that impression, which has been left on all of us who have visited our troops in theatre, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan: there is no question but that they are the best of the best. For that reason, we have the responsibility to ensure that they are protected as well as possible in the dangerous tasks that we ask of them. The optimal number of troops is a matter for operational advice. The advice that I have received is that the troops currently there are configured in the right way to carry out the tasks that we ask of them, but we keep that matter constantly under review.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Along with the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), I visited Basra last week. Major General Jonathan Shaw and the men and women under his command are doing a tremendous job, and we should be thankful that they are doing it. Does the Secretary of State agree that while the transfer of Bara to provincial Iraqi control will be welcome, setting artificial time lines for that decision would be a mistake and would possibly put our troops in further danger?

Des Browne: General Shaw and the troops that he commands are doing an excellent job, and I shall pass on to him my hon. Friend's comments. He speaks, as does the Chairman of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), for all Select Committee members who have visited. My hon. Friend's point is absolutely correct, and that is why I was pleased to see that the issue of security and the conditions for drawdown of troops were significantly addressed in the report of our own Iraq study group. This is a process of judging the security challenge, the Iraqi security forces' ability to meet it, and our own ability to respond to any circumstances that may threaten to overwhelm them at some time in the future, in the overall context of the development of the politics of that part of Iraq. That judgment must be made before we can make decisions about our troops. It is not an exact science, and it certainly does not lend itself to arbitrary timetables that would only put our people more at risk than they are already during the current period of transition.

Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): What does the Secretary of State make of the votes on withdrawal in both Houses of the American Congress? Is it still our policy that security will be the only consideration that determines the timetable for withdrawal? Given that this year is shaping up to be the bloodiest since 2003, is there not a risk that that could be a very long way off, and that the militias and insurgents will be given a say over the timetable?

What does the Secretary of State make of the Iraq Commission report, and what does he think our role will be after we hand over Basra province? Is not the

best idea the commission's suggestion that we concentrate on training and advice, and set a date for an end to our active deployment?

Des Browne: The hon. Gentleman invites me to intervene in domestic American politics and respond to decisions made in Congress. I do not intend to do that. Obviously such decisions are relevant to us, but our strategy remains the same. It cannot properly be defined as a strategy dependent solely on security; it is far from being that. I do not want to repeat my last answer in detail, but it described the path that we have taken.

Our strategy does not hang on the insurgents and on determination of the timetable. There has been an increase in the number of our casualties, but that is a function of the transition that we are undergoing. On almost every occasion we have deployed troops abroad, our casualty rate has risen when we have sought to emerge from combat and reduce the strength of our forces during a period of transition. In this instance, that is a function of a number of elements, not least the fact that the militia deployed in Basra city, supported by the Iranians, are determined to take the credit for driving us out of that city. I think that people who understand how insurgencies work would understand that that is the case. It is not the whole explanation for our casualty rate, but it is part of the explanation and people need to understand it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Since the United States is planning to withdraw, would it not be better if the British also set a date, or at least had a contingency plan, so that there is a clear timeline? I know the Secretary of State is reluctant to do that, but clearly the pressure is on for us to specify a point by which all the occupying forces will be out of Iraq and Iraq must decide its own future.

Des Browne: I do not consider myself to be under pressure to declare a timeline. In fact, I consider myself to be under pressure not to declare one. The declaration of a timeline would exacerbate the dynamic that I have just explained.

It is obvious what is going on in southern Iraq, where at least 85 per cent. of the violence is directed against our forces. There are people there who want to claim credit for driving us out, in a process that we have already announced and on which we are partly embarked. If my hon. Friend cannot contain his patience and watch us progress in the orderly way in which we have progressed for months, that is a matter for him, but he will certainly not persuade me to put our troops in any more danger than they are in already.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): During the past week the United States Congress has voted, for the third time this year, to withdraw forces from Iraq. Moreover, Prime Minister al-Maliki has said that coalition troops can leave whenever they like. Why is it only neo-Conservative United States Republicans and this Government who are delaying the final withdrawal of our brave service men and women from Iraq?

Des Browne: Prime Minister al-Maliki said his assessment was that in about three months' time the Iraqi security forces would be ready to take over responsibility for security in Basra. That was his assessment, and it is important, because it is part of the process of assessment that we will undergo, and have already undergone, in three of the four provinces from which we have withdrawn our troops and which we have allowed to be handed over to the security control of the Iraqis.

Since I took up my current post, I have consistently explained the precise strategy we are following, both from the Dispatch Box and elsewhere. We have never deviated from that strategy: we have not been forced to change by any set of circumstances, by votes in any other Parliament or by decisions of any other Government. I and my predecessor have explained the process; it is a logical one, and it is in the interests of the Iraqi people, towards whom we have a responsibility. It is also consistent with the United Nations Security Council resolution, and it represents the international community's will. Most importantly, it is the best and most sensible way to maintain our contribution to the Iraqi people and to protect our people—although they are, for reasons I have now twice explained this afternoon, under additional threat at present.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Can we assume from the answers that the Secretary of State has given that the process of withdrawal, which I support and welcome, is purely a British one?

Des Browne: We cannot make any such assumption. The process of transition to Iraqi control has been ongoing for some time now. On 21 February, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stood at the Dispatch Box and explained exactly what we were going to do. We currently have 5,500 troops in Iraq. If, as we expect, we manage in a matter of weeks to hand over the Basra palace to Iraqi security control, we will be able to draw down a further 500. We will then be in a position of overwatch, which we discussed in respect of an earlier question. At that stage, we will assess the ability of the Iraqi security forces in consultation with our allies—and chiefly with our principal ally, the United States of America—and decide whether we can move on to withdrawing our forces. We will also at that stage explain our continuing support for the Iraqi Government—because I am sure that there will be continuing support.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware of the recent comments of Lord Inge in the House of Lords that our involvement has been a strategic failure? The fact is that our troops are now dying at a greater rate than the Americans: they can expect to be attacked within 20 minutes of leaving base. After giving up the Basra palace, those gallant men will have to retreat to the airport. How can they effectively run a country or conduct peacekeeping operations from an airport? What is our strategy, apart from staying there just to prove that we have a strategy? We should get out and get out now.

Des Browne: I can only suspect that the hon. Gentleman has only recently entered the Chamber as I spent some time, in answer to an earlier question, explaining our strategy—explaining the logic of it and why it involves assessments of the security situation, the Iraqis' ability to respond, our ability to support

them and the political support that the security forces are receiving from the Iraqis. The commission suggests that we are mistaken in thinking that the goal can be achieved by military means alone, but we have never suggested that the future of Iraq was dependent on military means alone. It is fundamentally dependent on the ability of the Iraqis themselves to stand up properly their organisations and the level of political support for those organisations in certain parts of the country. That is their challenge, and we can do only so much to help them. However, that analysis of the situation gives no support to the assertion that the hon. Gentleman has just made.

Military Recruitment and Retention

6. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): If he will make a statement on levels of recruitment and retention in the armed forces. [149378]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Derek Twigg): In 2006-07, the armed forces achieved 97 per cent. of their recruitment requirement. Recruitment and retention are constantly monitored and there are significant manning challenges and shortages in specific areas. We are taking action to address them by continuing to improve recruitment and by renewing efforts on retention, and by restructuring our forces to focus effort in those areas most in demand. Those measures include targeted financial retention initiatives and extensions to normal engagement lengths.

Chris Bryant: On retention, there is a paradox in the fact that the quality and standards of training in the armed forces are now so high that almost all armed forces personnel have such a strong set of skills in terms of logistics, communications and many other areas that they are immensely valuable in the private sector. However, many of those who leave because they get offered much better pay elsewhere want to maintain a strong connection with the armed forces. Is there a way to maintain such stronger links in the future, not only through people volunteering as reservists for tours of duty but in other ways?

Derek Twigg: I take on board my hon. Friend's point about there being significant challenges. We want to retain such connections through the reservist route and the Territorial Army; we wish to encourage that. As my hon. Friend rightly says, many people leave the armed forces with a wide range of skills and abilities which they put to good use when they enter the private and public sectors. We always keep our options open in terms of what we can do to improve retention and recruitment and continuing connection with the armed forces.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say. I am sure he agrees that while recruiting figures may be improving, many of the units are woefully undermanned. I am also sure that he agrees that the job of Commander Recruiting Group is absolutely key and that he is the most important brigadier at the heart of this problem. Why then was that gentleman absent for more than six months last year on a court martial?

Derek Twigg: I cannot answer the specific question about the individual concerned, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the reasons. However, significant resources and effort go into recruitment and retention, and I am sure that he knows that. We accept, as I have made clear publicly and previously in the Chamber, that there are significant challenges, specifically in certain pinchpoint grades where there are shortages.

The position in terms of voluntary outflows has remained fairly stable over the past 10 years or so, although there has been a slight increase. However, we must keep some specific grades under review and try to do more, whether through financial incentives, work-life balance or other incentives.

John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the provision of a state of the art tri-service military training academy at St. Athan in my constituency will do an enormous amount to help us to achieve our desired recruitment and retention levels in Her Majesty's forces?

Derek Twigg: I know that my hon. Friend has been a great advocate of the defence training review, and that he has often expressed his support for that. However, he knows that we are looking at how to achieve package 1 and package 2 and whether the whole-programme solution is possible. As soon as we are in a position to do so, we will make an announcement.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): Given that the Minister is so keen to improve recruitment, can he explain the ludicrous decision to freeze all recruiting in the Territorial Army next year for units that do not contribute directly to Afghanistan or Iraq? For the sake of £2 million, that will decimate the TA's future.

Derek Twigg: I know that the hon. Gentleman has raised that issue previously on the Floor of the House. Given his background, may I pay tribute to his service? I know that he takes a great interest in the TA, reservists and what is happening. He knows, because we have said so, that TA operations will not be affected by those savings measures. The decision to make a small reduction in funding to the TA was carefully considered, and was targeted at areas that would cause least problems in operational effectiveness.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): On recruitment, does the Minister agree that new recruits join with the prospect of joining first-class units with first-class equipment? Does he also agree that the Government are to be commended on their naval shipbuilding programme? In that context, does he agree that people would flood forward to join the Royal Navy if only he or his right hon. Friend would announce this week or next week the building of two aircraft carriers?

Derek Twigg: I understand my hon. Friend's point, but he will have to wait a little longer for the decision.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): May I associate myself with the tributes to Guardsman Daryl Hickey of the Grenadier Guards, who are based at

Aldershot but are serving with enormous distinction in Afghanistan, where I had the privilege of meeting some of them?

The Minister said that he faces a significant challenge. Is he aware that the outflow of experienced Royal Air Force officers and other ranks is particularly marked, having increased by an alarming 50 per cent. over the past three years? As the Defence Committee reported recently, the tempo of intensive war-fighting operations in the middle east is taking a relentless toll on servicemen and their families, with the Nimrod, Harrier and transport crews facing particular difficulties. I suggest that the Secretary of State tell the Prime Minister that Her Majesty's armed forces are appalled at the downgrading of his post by its being combined with the Scottish Office, and that it should be full time so that he can address the serious crisis in retention of experience personnel across all three armed services.

Derek Twigg: In response to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, we recognise the tremendous work and effort that our armed forces are putting in and the great pressures and challenges facing them. As we have heard today, they are doing a marvellous job. We understand the pressures, and we are working with various incentives and methods to try to improve recruitment and retention. I understand the specific point that he made about RAF pilots, and work is ongoing.

As for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, anyone who knows him knows that he works very hard and does a tremendous job. It will make no difference to the efforts that he puts in for the armed forces.

Gulf War Veterans

7. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): How many first Gulf war veterans receive war pensions; and if he will make a statement. [149379]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Derek Twigg): At the end of March 2007, some 3,265 Gulf veterans were in receipt of a war pension. This figure includes awards for both Gulf-related and non-Gulf-related injuries or illnesses, as our statistics do not distinguish the origin of the disablement.

Hugh Bayley: Terry Walker, who lived in Wheldrake in York, was a fit lance-corporal when he went to Iraq to fight in the first Gulf war. He came back with broken health and was discharged from the Army. Last month he died, leaving two children, both below the age of majority, who are being cared for by his parents. At present, no provision is being made for those two children either from his serviceman's pension or from the War Pensions Agency. Will the Minister examine the case as a matter of great urgency and ensure that provision is made for the children of Terry Walker?

Derek Twigg: On behalf of the Government, I offer my sincere condolences to Mr. Walker's family and friends. I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on an individual case on the Floor of the House, but I assure him that I will look into it.

Afghanistan

8. **Paul Flynn** (Newport, West) (Lab): How many British personnel have been killed and seriously injured in Helmand province since February 2006. [149380]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Des Browne): The deaths of British personnel and injuries sustained while performing their duties with characteristic dedication are a source of profound regret and I repeat my admiration for the work our forces do. Since 1 February 2006, until 12 July, 43 British personnel have been killed in Helmand province. Up to 30 June 2007, 51 personnel have been seriously or very seriously injured in Helmand.

Paul Flynn: The original hope for the Helmand mission was that it would last for three years without a shot being fired. Half a million shots have been fired and it may last for 30 years. There has been no improvement in the drug situation, no reduction in the threat of terrorism, and precious little reconstruction because the non-governmental organisations will not operate there—all bought at the cost of the worst casualties that Britain has suffered since world war two. Do not those awful outcomes, particularly the loss of life, cry out for a reassessment of the nature and scale of the Helmand mission before it drifts into Britain's Vietnam?

Des Browne: The whole House knows my hon. Friend's views on the deployment of our forces in Helmand province. Those forces are deployed there with the forces of 36 other countries. The Government are clearly of the view that the deployment of forces in Helmand province in support of the international security assistance force there—in conjunction with Operation Enduring Freedom and in support of other countries that are there for reconstruction purposes—is not a discretionary operation but a compulsory one for the security of the world. That view is shared by the United Nations, by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, whom I met recently, by the whole of the European Union, by Javier Solana, whom I met last week to discuss the matter, and by almost all the rest of the world. Despite those facts, my hon. Friend and a small number of other people think that it is the wrong thing to do. I fundamentally disagree with him. I do not think that the people of this city would be as secure as they are—they still face risks from terrorism—if we were not prepared to do what we are doing in Afghanistan. I do not think that the people of the developed world would be as safe as they are if we were not prepared, as an international community, to do what we are doing in Afghanistan. The fact that it is a dangerous thing to do does not make it any less right to do it.

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State recognise the importance of evacuating seriously injured casualties from Helmand province by helicopter as quickly as possible? Will he indicate whether the future addition of six Merlin and eight Chinook helicopters will be used for that purpose? Will their addition bring helicopter numbers up to requirement? If not, will he consider hiring helicopters

for casevac—casualty evacuation—and other measures as a way of filling the undoubted gap in the provision of helicopters?

Des Browne: I recognise that helicopters are vital to our success in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her consistent questioning of me and other Ministers on support for our troops and in other respects. She knows that we have made additional hours available and that further work continues on spares and crewing to increase the hours per month that helicopters can fly. She knows that we have developed a way of turning individual helicopters into treatment centres, rather than having dedicated casevac helicopters; that is the right thing to do. She also knows that I announced the intention to buy six additional Merlin helicopters, which will be available within a year, and to convert the eight existing Mark 3 Chinook helicopters to make them available for deployment. We have invested £230 million in that regard, but if that does not provide sufficient helicopter support for our troops in their continuing commitment to operations abroad, I am of course prepared to identify and deploy other resources to that effect.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry (Portsmouth, North) (Lab/Co-op): I was in Helmand province about three weeks ago. I pay tribute to those service personnel who gave their lives or were seriously injured in helping the Afghan Government to beat the Taliban. They were helping other British servicemen and women and servicemen and women from other countries in carrying out development and reconstruction work in Helmand. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that development and reconstruction work is the key to peace and stability, not only in Helmand or even Afghanistan but in the whole region?

Des Browne: I commend my hon. Friend and the other right hon. and hon. Members who have taken the time and trouble to visit our forces in Afghanistan. I realise that not everyone can do that—it depends on a degree of support from the Ministry and from the troops in that country—but those who have had that experience are consistent not only in their praise for what is being done but in bringing back the message that our troops on the ground are in no doubt of the value of what they are doing, despite the manifest and obvious dangers. They are in no doubt about the contribution they are making, and daily they see the improvements in Helmand province, which are sometimes falsely measured against metrics that we here in London set for them. The best way to assess whether our troops are making a difference to the people of Helmand province and Afghanistan is to ask them, and they are in no doubt about that.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): But will the Secretary of State accept that the loss of life and serious injury in both Afghanistan and Iraq is running at far too high a level for any of us to be complacent or comfortable? Will he, with his military advisers, look again at what other measures can be taken in terms of support, equipment, back-up and evasive action to give our troops a greater chance of surviving?

Des Browne: I share the right hon. Gentleman's regret at any loss of life. The loss of any soldier is a tragedy. The loss of any innocent life is a source of profound regret. There is no complacency on my part about the loss of any life—far from it. I devote a significant amount of my time as Secretary of State for Defence, and have done for the past 14 months, to doing precisely what he asks me to do. I consider every day whether what we are doing in Afghanistan is the right thing to do and whether we are doing it in the right way. He and all other Members of the House can rest assured that our forces' protection, security of life and progress in development are uppermost in my mind.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): British military fatalities are, tragically, outstripping the capacity of the coroner service, so the receiving coroner, Wiltshire's David Masters, to whom I spoke this morning, is relieved that his long-awaited ministerial meeting has—under pressure—been brought forward to 25 July, and that he will now be able to put the case for the resources needed to tackle the military inquest backlog over which this Government have presided, to their lasting shame. As a redeeming measure, what will the Secretary of State do on behalf of the deceased and their long-suffering families to ensure that the coroner has everything he needs, without any more procrastination, in accordance with last Thursday's remarks by his right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House?

Des Browne: First, may I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new responsibilities on the Front Bench? All members of my team look forward to working with him.

The Wiltshire coroner does not have a backlog of military inquests. He has one pre-April 2007 inquest hearing outstanding, which is on the deaths of 10 crew members killed in a Hercules crash in January 2005. He held a pre-inquest hearing on that case in February. The timing of that inquest is entirely within his control. Given the complexity and the nature of the inquest, I fully understand why it has taken such a time to get to the full inquest hearing, and I make no comment about that.

The most significant thing that we have done, apart from providing additional resources to address the backlog that had built up in Oxfordshire, is to remove the reliance on a single coroner. That means that in cases that would normally have been the responsibility of the Wiltshire coroner because of where the body rested, there is now no reason for him to be responsible for carrying out the inquest. Specifically, of those cases that are on his list, 24 can be expected to be dealt with by home coroners—that is, coroners nearer the homes of the families involved. In my view, that is the best development that we could ensure, in terms of properly respecting the families. It leaves only 10 of the cases on the list that has been used by the media as his responsibility.

The hon. Gentleman can rest assured and can reassure the Wiltshire coroner that the issue, which I took up immediately on taking office, sits on my desk every day. I have been working on it with colleagues from the Department for Constitutional Affairs, and

now am doing so with colleagues from the Ministry of Justice. I will do everything that I can, and if the issue needs additional resources, I will identify them, but I do not accept that there is a backlog.

Paul Flynn: Owing to the unsatisfactory nature—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot get away with that. He has to do that immediately.

Paul Flynn: I did.

Mr. Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman allowed other supplementaries to be asked. He knows the rules of the House as well as I do.

Afghanistan

9. **Mr. David Jones** (Clwyd, West) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the military capability of the Taliban in Afghanistan. [149381]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Des Browne): The Taliban are currently able to threaten Afghan and international security forces in parts of eastern and southern Afghanistan by means of improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers and small-scale attacks. They have not been able to hold territory in the face of offensive action by Afghan and international security forces. The recent loss of a number of senior commanders as a result of action by international forces is likely to have had an impact on the Taliban's ability to plan and co-ordinate operations.

Mr. Jones: What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the recent statement made by the United States Secretary of Defence, who said that there is evidence of a substantial flow of weapons from Iran to the insurgents in Afghanistan—a view that appears to be supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Does the Secretary of State agree that if the Iranian regime is indeed engaged in arming the Taliban, that would amount to a direct challenge, not only to NATO but to the authority of the United Nations?

Des Browne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The last time Defence questions were held, I told the House that my view was that that was happening. We have successfully interdicted the transfer of arms across the Iranian border into the southern part of Afghanistan. To my knowledge, on at least two occasions—perhaps even more—we have identified markings on weaponry that suggest that it had its origins in Iran. Of course, because of the complex nature of the Iranian regime, it is often difficult to identify exactly how the situation came about, and who in the regime may, or may not, have known about it. As I have explained before in the House, in my view if a regime is constructed to create that confusion, it has to take responsibility for what the confused parts of it do. That is, and has been, my position, and that is why, in all the international discussions that I have on the issue with people from across the world, I bring the fact that that is happening to the attention of all those who wish to talk to me, and I say that they ought to make it clear to the Iranians that it is unacceptable.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): When the Defence Committee recently visited Afghanistan we found 12 Mechanised Brigade in extremely good heart and determined to beat the Taliban, but is it not distressing that British armed forces bear the brunt while so many of our European allies fail to provide the military commitment that they should be obliged to provide under the NATO treaty? Will the Secretary of State tell the Prime Minister that he needs to spend every waking hour travelling the capitals of Europe to drum up more support for these operations? How is he able to spend time on anything other than his defence responsibilities?

Des Browne: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that in the last week alone I have spoken to those in Berlin involved in providing such forces, in the person of the German Minister of Defence, and in Paris in the person of the newly appointed Defence Minister, and, as I have already told the House, I had a long conversation with Javier Solana seeking further EU support on the civil side for what we are doing. So the hon. Gentleman can rest assured that despite my responsibilities in relation to Scotland I have not fallen down on this issue or the challenge that I identified some time ago in getting other countries to increase their support to us, particularly in the south of Afghanistan. I anticipate that we will see improvements in relation to that. For example, he will have noticed that the Danish Parliament has effectively agreed to send a battle group to Helmand, which will operate partly under our command in the central part of Helmand province and will make a significant contribution to our ability to continue the work of the Mechanised Brigade there, whose success and commitment I thank the hon. Gentleman for recognising.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman and his two predecessors as Secretary of State for Defence have been dismissive of my warnings about the unwisdom of our latest invasion of Afghanistan, but will he at least take seriously the speech in another place last week by Field Marshal Lord Inge, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) has already referred, but to whose supplementary the Minister chose not to reply? The Field Marshal, who himself has recently visited Afghanistan, said that the situation in Afghanistan is

"much, much more serious than people want to recognise"

and spoke of

"strategic failure". —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 July 2007; Vol. 693, c. 1467-68.]

How does that measure up against these interminable, bland replies by the right hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman certainly made a good speech there, but it should have been a supplementary. Perhaps the reply should be briefer than usual.

Des Browne: One of the challenges that I face is that any answers to the hon. Gentleman's questions would seem bland. He consistently questions me on this and I pay tribute to his consistency. The fact that we disagree does not necessarily mean that he is right and I am wrong. Earlier, I gave a litany of other experts, organisations and representatives of the international community who do not share his view.

Sir Peter Tapsell: What about Lord Inge?

Des Browne: The first point that I need to make is that our deployment of troops to Helmand province was not an invasion. We were invited there by the sovereign Government of Afghanistan in the context of a United Nations Security Council resolution. I fully respect the views of the hon. Gentleman and Lord Inge on this, and I consider them carefully. However, the hon. Gentleman does not have a monopoly of views among those who have expertise in relation to military issues, and his views are not supported by other advice that I receive from people who are as well qualified as he is.

Fleet Requirements

10. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): How many destroyers and frigates are required by the fleet. [149382]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): The Royal Navy's requirement is for a fleet of 25 destroyers and frigates. This was set out in the White Paper "Delivering Security in a Changing World—Future Capabilities" presented to the House in July 2004.

Stephen Hammond: I note that four years ago the then Defence Secretary said that the MOD needed 12 Type 45 destroyers. In August 2004, the figure was reduced to eight. If *The Times* today is to be believed, boats seven and eight will not be built. Why does the Minister think that the Navy's requirement is half that of four years ago?

Mr. Ainsworth: The capability has not changed from that laid out in the White Paper, as I have said. The hon. Gentleman is taking a simplistic view if he assesses the strength of the Royal Navy by only counting hulls. He should listen to Commander David Shutts, who is the senior naval officer overseeing the Daring trial, which is the first of the Type 45 destroyers:

"This ship is five levels of sophistication ahead of what we had before. Her weapon system is the most advanced in the world, but we also have a hospital on board, a Chinook-sized flight deck and room for 70 extra beds. We will get more capability with this ship than we have seen since World War II."

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): I hear what my hon. Friend has said, but he must agree that although the Daring is a class above any other destroyer that has been built on the Clyde, a lot of workers on the Clyde are looking for jobs. It appears that those jobs are linked to the decision whether there will be two carriers or one carrier. Will he make that decision now and let us know what is going on?

Mr. Ainsworth: I cannot make that decision now, and my hon. Friend must wait a little while for a decision on whether the carriers will be provided. We are in the middle of a substantial shipbuilding programme, and a number of projects are either delivering ships or preparing for production. Over the next 10 years, £14 billion is likely to be allocated to those shipbuilding programmes.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his new responsibilities. I must also say a word of appreciation about his predecessor, the right hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr. Ingram), who discharged his responsibilities for a long time with great assiduity and reliability.

The Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) did not begin to address the problem of the number of frigates and destroyers. The Type 45 destroyers were always intended to have the extra capabilities that he described. If we needed eight destroyers in 2004, as the supplement to the White Paper stated, then we need eight now, let alone the 12 that were originally planned. The 2004 White Paper stated that 25 frigates and destroyers are required. Will he guarantee that that figure will not be further reduced?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has made his point.

Mr. Ainsworth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about my predecessor, who did this job for six years with, as the hon. Gentleman has said, great distinction. It is difficult to follow my predecessor, given the way in which he did the job.

The White Paper laid out the need for eight destroyers. A decision has not been taken yet, because we are still negotiating the detail of the provision for ships four, five and six. It would be wholly wrong to sign off further ships while those negotiations continue. The hon. Gentleman knows that, and I think that he understands the point.

Alexander Litvinenko (Case Update)

3.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (David Miliband): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on developments in the Litvinenko case. This is a situation that the Government have not sought and do not welcome. However, we have no choice but to address it.

The Government believe that Russia is a key international partner for the United Kingdom. We want to work with the Government of Russia and its people in tackling priority international issues such as climate change, Kosovo, Iran, the middle east peace process and Sudan. Russia plays a global role in the battles against terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, illegal migration, drugs and international crime. The cultural exchange between our two countries is extensive. Our bilateral trade relationship is large and growing, including considerable benefits for the City of London. British companies are making a major contribution to the Russian economy. For all those reasons we need a relationship based on trust and mutual respect.

On 28 May, the Russian authorities were presented with a formal request for the extradition to the UK of Andrey Lugovoy so that he might stand trial for the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in a British court. Let me remind the House of the relevant procedures. The Crown Prosecution Service is an independent prosecuting authority. Once the Metropolitan police have referred a case to the Crown Prosecution Service, it is then for the CPS to consider whether there is sufficient evidence to bring charges, and that it is in the public interest to do so. The CPS concluded that Mr. Lugovoy did indeed have a case to answer, and sought the assistance of the Home Office in requesting his extradition from Russia. On 6 July, the Russian deputy prosecutor general sent an official letter to the Home Secretary refusing to extradite Mr. Lugovoy. On 10 July, the Director of Public Prosecutions announced that, despite the Russian response, he continues to press for a trial of Mr. Lugovoy in England. Given the seriousness of the crime and our ambitions for our bilateral relationship with Russia, Russia's reply to the CPS's extradition request is extremely disappointing. It suggests that the Russian Government have failed to register either how seriously we treat this case or the seriousness of the issues involved, despite lobbying at the highest level and clear explanations of our need for a satisfactory response.

It is worth reiterating why this matters. The Metropolitan police have assembled a significant body of evidence against Andrey Lugovoy. I can confirm the following. It is alleged that this grave crime took place in London in November 2006 when Mr. Lugovoy poisoned Mr. Litvinenko by administering a lethal dose of polonium-210, a highly radioactive substance. It is part of the prosecution case that on the afternoon of 1 November, Mr. Litvinenko drank tea which he had poured, after an invitation from Mr. Lugovoy, from a teapot which was later found to be heavily contaminated with polonium-210. There is also evidence that shows a trail of polonium-210 on aircraft in which Mr. Lugovoy travelled to and from London. On 23 November, Mr. Litvinenko died in a London hospital of an acute radiation injury. The facts are therefore that a UK citizen has suffered a horrifying and lingering death; his murder put hundreds of others, residents and visitors, at risk of radiation contamination; and the UK Government have a wider duty to ensure the safety of the large Russian community living in the UK.

The deputy prosecutor general's letter says that the Russian constitution currently bars extradition. The Russian authorities have given no indication of a willingness to work with us to address this question. The situation is not unique. For example, other countries have recently amended their constitutions to give effect to the European arrest warrant. Indeed, Russia wants the EU and the UK to open their borders to free movement of people, goods and services as part of an intensification of relations. This needs to be matched by an equal Russian commitment to cross-border judicial co-operation.

Since Mr. Litvinenko's death, the Government's key priority has been to ensure the integrity of the legal process in order to secure justice for Mr. Litvinenko. The Director of Public Prosecutions made it clear that the allegations against Mr. Lugovoy refer to a crime against a British citizen in London. The appropriate venue for the trial is therefore London. Moreover, both the UN and the EU have reported their concern that the law in Russia is applied selectively. There would therefore be grounds for a legal challenge against the Government over any attempt to accept a trial in Russia.

Given the importance of this issue and Russia's failure to co-operate to find a solution, we need an appropriate response. Our aims are clear: first, to advance our judicial process; secondly, to bring home to the Russian Government the consequences of their failure to co-operate; and thirdly, to emphasise our commitment to promoting the safety of British citizens and visitors. I have therefore agreed with colleagues across Government the following steps. First, we will expel four diplomats from the Russian embassy in London. Secondly, we shall review the extent of our co-operation with Russia on a range of issues; as an initial step, we have suspended visa facilitation negotiations with Russia and made other changes to visa practice. Thirdly, international agreements mean that Mr. Lugovoy could be extradited to the UK if he travelled abroad. Fourthly, we are grateful for the strong support that we have received from EU partners and close allies, including through the EU presidency statement on 1 June. We will discuss with partners the need for future EU-Russia engagement to take our concerns on this case into account.

The foundation of an effective international partnership is a set of shared values. The measures that I am announcing are intended to uphold key individual rights and vital principles of independent judicial process. On that basis, we will continue to work with the Government of Russia for mutual benefit. I will keep Parliament informed of developments as appropriate.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, and I say at the outset that the Opposition support the tone and

[Mr. William Hague]

substance of the Government's response to Russia's refusal to extradite Andrey Lugovoy. As the Foreign Secretary said, the grounds for requesting Mr. Lugovoy's extradition are clear: he is accused of murdering a British citizen, Alexander Litvinenko, here in London, by poisoning him with radioactive material in an horrific and calculating manner that caused incalculable suffering to the victim and grievous danger to the British public. Across British politics, we are united in regarding this matter with the utmost seriousness. In such circumstances, we have the right to expect co-operation from our international partners, and Russia's failure to extradite Mr. Lugovoy in these exceptional circumstances will only damage its reputation in the world.

I should be grateful if the Secretary of State would clarify the following points. Both Russia and the UK are parties to the 1957 European convention on extradition, and signed a memorandum of understanding on co-operation in the legal field in February last year, which included an undertaking to

"co-operate in the sphere of extradition and in other issues of mutual legal assistance."

Can he explain what force those agreements have, if any, and have the Government referred to them in seeking Mr Lugovoy's extradition?

The Foreign Secretary described the risk to Mr Lugovoy of facing extradition to the UK if he travels to third countries. Can he confirm that the Government will actively seek assurances from other countries that they will arrest Mr. Lugovoy if he enters their territory? In a recent interview President Putin stated that

"the request had no substance"—

that is, the request for extradition—because Britain did not provide the materials documenting the grounds on which he should be extradited. What specific additional information did the Russian side request, which it claims not to have received? Additionally, what counter-proposals have the Russian Government put forward, and what view have the UK Government taken of those proposals? Are the Government considering any other options, such as a trial in a third country?

With regard to the expulsion of the four Russian diplomats, will the Foreign Secretary clarify the seniority of the diplomats in question, and whether Russia has indicated that it will take countermeasures? He also referred to changes to visa practice. Can he indicate what changes are envisaged? Does he agree that the issue must not be simply allowed to fade? In that respect, is it not vital that we seek the utmost support from our allies and friendly nations in reinforcing the message that Russia must abide by international rules if it is to receive the assistance and co-operation it hopes for on other issues?

We welcome the news that the Government have received strong support for their stance from European Union partners and close allies. Has the Secretary of State received any indications that that support will result in concrete measures being taken by our allies to reinforce our position, and what measures are the Government seeking from them?

In its approach to international co-operation, should Russia not be mindful of the fact that it has need of the friendship and support of Britain and the EU in its aspirations to join the World Trade Organisation, its pursuit of investment in Russian oil and gas fields and its desire to purchase foreign assets? In the long term, we—like the Government—hope to see Russia maintain its status as a key international partner for the UK and we hope for improved relations, as the Foreign Secretary said, so that we can work together on the pressing issues of nuclear proliferation, middle east peace, Kosovo and Iran. Is it not clear, however, that such improved relations are going to require a more positive and co-operative approach than we have seen from Moscow in recent weeks? However much we may hope for them, an appalling crime of this nature and gravity cannot simply be overlooked.

David Miliband: First of all, let me say that sometimes, across this Dispatch Box, spokesmen for different parties make commitments to work together in the national interest that are taken with a pinch of salt. However, on a previous occasion, the right hon. Gentleman said that he wanted to work with the Government on interests of national interest where there could be a bipartisan approach, and today he has demonstrated that he is a man of his word in that area. His support for the Government's approach is very significant because it sends the signal that the measures we are announcing today have support across the political spectrum in the United Kingdom. I look forward to the response of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats. I hope that we can say at the end of our discussion of the statement that the measures have the support of the United Kingdom, not just the United Kingdom Government.

Let me go through the points raised by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). We perceived it as a positive step that the Russian Government wanted to sign the memorandum of understanding. However, that memorandum is an exchange of information about the extradition practices in different countries, not a legally binding instrument. I am disappointed that it does not transpire that the Russian desire to be party to it is reflected in the case that we are considering.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked about active assurances that had been sought from the Russian Government, especially in respect of the response from the deputy prosecutor general. He did not ask for more evidence, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that substantial and sufficient information has been sent to the Russian authorities to make it clear that there is a case to answer. That is the responsibility of the Crown Prosecution Service.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned trial in a third country, which will doubtless be raised in the next few hours. The bar that the Russians use to justify failure to extradite to this country applies equally to another country. Either there is or there is not a constitutional bar.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the seniority of the diplomats who are being expelled. We have chosen to expel four particular diplomats in order to send a clear and proportionate signal to the Russian

Government about the seriousness of the case. He also asked about visa practice and it may help if I explain the difference between the visa practice and the visa facilitation that I mentioned in the statement. Visa practice refers to officials from the Russian Government and visa facilitation refers to an attempt or desire on our part to speed up visa processes outside diplomatic circles. The latter cannot go ahead in the way in which we had hoped.

I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support for the work of our international partners. I have obviously discussed the matter with G7 and EU partners, and we will take it further at the General Affairs Council next week.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly concluded that Russia and the United Kingdom have strong shared interests and that it is strongly in Russia's interest to have a positive and co-operative relationship with the UK. That is our desire. Russia has every right to be a full and respected partner of the international community, but with that right go responsibilities. Today is about asserting that those responsibilities as well as those rights should be exercised properly.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): May I also support the measured approach of the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary? Given that the recent events follow harassment of our ambassador in Moscow and difficulties for the British Council in Russia, does the Foreign Secretary believe that there is a wider problem, which relates to not only Mr. Lugovoy but a growing difficulty with Russia accepting that it must abide by international norms of behaviour towards this country and other countries? In that context, I welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks about European Union solidarity and remind him and the House that other EU countries, especially some of the smaller ones, have also experienced difficulties with Russia in recent weeks.

David Miliband: It is important that, in the discussion on the statement, I stick closely to the case in hand, which is that of Mr. Lugovoy and the integrity of our judicial process. However, my hon. Friend makes a good point about an issue that we could debate at greater length on another occasion: the way in which we, as part of the international community, help achieve a proper relationship between Russia and other countries, which has to be based on mutual respect. We are clear that Russia should have a respected place in the international community, but that it must exercise the responsibilities that go with membership of that community. I look forward to discussing that with my hon. Friend and the Foreign Affairs Committee in due course.

Mr. Michael Moore (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (LD): I also welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, but like everybody else I regret the circumstances that require him to make it. The murder of Alexander Litvinenko was a despicable crime, compounded by the perpetrator's reckless disregard for the safety of countless others in this country and elsewhere. We agree that the lack of co-operation from the Russian authorities has forced the Government to act and we support the Foreign Secretary in all the measures that he has proposed.

May I draw the Foreign Secretary's thoughts back to one of the points that the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee just made, about the harassment of British diplomats and employees of the British Council? Does he still have concerns about that wider difficult pattern of behaviour by the Russian authorities? On the broader issue of British and European links with Russia, does he agree that, now more than ever, Europe must work through a united approach, developing a constructive relationship where possible, but also seeking to restrain Russia when it proves difficult on issues such as Kosovo?

David Miliband: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. It is significant that we should have cross-party consensus on the issue. I am also grateful to him for picking me up on not addressing properly the question that the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee asked about the harassment of diplomats and representatives of the British Council. Any such acts are extremely serious and completely contrary to the way in which civilised behaviour should be taken forward. That is obviously the case for diplomats, but it is also the case for the hard-working staff of the British Council, whether they be British citizens or locally hired citizens.

It may help the House if I report that the overwhelming majority of press and media comment in Russia on the work of the British Council is extremely positive. The scurrilous rumours that are put round about the council are completely without foundation. The operational work of the British Council—its priorities and its way of working—is set independently. It would be reprehensible for there to be any suggestion that its important work should be subject to any harassment or other interference.

Finally, in respect of the European Union, I shall be discussing the issue next week. We look forward to taking the issues under discussion forward with our European partners, including that of the wider bilateral relationship. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes) is right that a range of countries want the issue on the agenda of European meetings, and we shall certainly contribute fully to that.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): Is it not apparent that the more the Russians take the attitude that my right hon. Friend has mentioned, the more the suspicion grows that they have something to hide? In view of the circumstances, is it not also clear that if the Government had not taken this action, it would seem that we were not taking the murder of a United Kingdom citizen seriously? In all those circumstances, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what is being done.

David Miliband: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his strong support. The heinous crime of murder requires justice, and I believe that the response that we have set out today is the right one. It is a proportionate response; who it is aimed at is clear, as are the points it is trying to make and the aims that it is trying to secure. I am grateful for his support.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has told the House that the deputy prosecutor general's letter says that the Russian constitution currently bars extradition. I am

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

sure that the right hon. Gentleman has taken advice from our embassy in Moscow. Is the deputy prosecutor general correct when he says that the constitution bars extradition? If it does, what is the process of amendment?

David Miliband: We are not entering into a legal argument with the Russian Government about the current status of the Russian constitution; what we are seeking is their co-operation in overcoming this obstacle. As I said in my statement, other countries, including Germany, have recently made amendments to their constitutions precisely to address the issues raised by the European arrest warrant. As I also said in my statement, the Russian desire is for greater interaction with the European Union and the UK. That must be on the basis of responsibilities as well as rights being properly exercised. It is on that basis that we have asked for co-operation from the Russian Government in addressing the issue. It is that co-operation that we have failed to secure.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Given the recent treatment of British gas and oil interests in Russia and the way in which gas and oil have been used for political leverage with some of Russia's neighbours, and in the light of the Litvinenko case and the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes), is the Foreign Secretary confident that Russia is still a country with which we can do business?

David Miliband: It is important that we continue to do business with Russia, according to clear international rules. I have spoken to the director general of the CBI today, and tomorrow I shall meet representatives of some of the major companies that do business in and with Russia. It is important that that trade should continue, because our economic relations are important. It is also the case, however, that the business that we do and the economic links that we have should be founded on clear rules, which should be respected by all sides.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I very much agree with the Foreign Secretary's judgment in making this statement today. There are broader issues involved, however, and I expect that they will be considered in the months and years to come. In particular, there is the question of allowing individuals such as Mr. Litvinenko into the UK and giving him a passport in double quick time. This is a grave concern, not least because of the great danger that was posed to many of my constituents in central London where he resided, as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore) pointed out. The Foreign Secretary and I both have forefathers who have come to this country from abroad and decided to make their lives here and abide by the laws. Will he ensure that, when looking at people coming into this country from Russia or elsewhere, we do not allow anyone to come here who will agitate against other sovereign states?

David Miliband: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is yes. We must ensure that people who come here have an independently assessed legal right to be here, and that they abide by the laws of this country while they are here. When they are British citizens, they will have rights under the 1957 European convention, which will be properly exercised. Those rights are clear, and they are not a licence to call for the overthrow of Governments, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. Any such suggestions are investigated not by me but by the independent Crown Prosecution Service, and that will be the case for any citizen of this country, whether they are of long standing or have recently arrived.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wholeheartedly congratulate the Foreign Secretary on the approach that he has adopted today. A robust attitude is essential. We have only to read the Foreign Office's own report on human rights abuses in Russia last year to see a catalogue including the suppression of the right of peaceful association and of non-governmental organisations and the systematic use of torture and abuse in the prison system throughout the Russian Federation. Does my right hon. Friend also worry about Russia's recent decision to suspend its membership of the treaty on European conventional forces? Is not that a dangerous step to take?

David Miliband: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The treaty on conventional forces in Europe is the cornerstone of European security, and the announcement by the Russian President that he would suspend—although not withdraw—Russian engagement with that treaty is very serious. As I said in answer to an earlier question, I am addressing the Lugovoy case today, but there is a common theme here. That theme is about the rights and responsibilities that go with membership of the international community, whether in respect of legal questions or of military questions to do with conventional forces, and it is important that the Government of Russia, and every other Government, proceed on the basis of clear mutual respect of the rights of other countries as well as of their own rights and responsibilities.

Lynne Featherstone (Hornsey and Wood Green) (LD): Mr. Litvinenko was my constituent. When I asked the former Home Secretary to pursue this matter without fear or favour, he said that he would do so. I regard the Secretary of State's statement today as following up on that promise to a great extent, and I welcome his remarks. I hope that Russia will see the benefit of these relationships. However, there are many questions that I do not have time to put to the Foreign Secretary today, and I wonder whether he would agree to meet me and Mrs. Litvinenko so that we can ask him those questions.

David Miliband: I am keen to respond positively to the hon. Lady's questions. If they are technical, I will arrange for them to be answered clearly; and if the hon. Lady and Mrs. Litvinenko would like to meet me or my colleague the Minister for Europe, I am sure that we can arrange a meeting with one or other of us.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): May I make it clear that I, too, deprecate the murder and recognise the gravity of the situation caused to Londoners by that murder? The issue before the House today, however, is whether the response is proportionate and

will have the desired effect. That is where my mood differs from that of the House; I am not sure that the response will be effective. Presumably, the Secretary of State will make a statement when he reinstates the four diplomats whom he is expelling—because that will happen; it happens by creep. Everyone knows that.

Secondly, I am deeply concerned about the House's mood, which seems to be anti-Russian, regardless of the fact that we sometimes treat the Russians very arrogantly, and that they have people who they perceive should be facing their courts in London, protected by our system. I believe that we should pause and reflect on whether our relations are spiralling down very badly. A few moments ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to Russia's stalling on the conventional armed forces in Europe treaty and there is also the attitude to Kosovo. I think that we are on a dangerous course—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that we are on a course of asking too many supplementary questions.

Andrew Mackinlay: It is different, though, from the rest!

David Miliband: No one could accuse my hon. Friend of not being different. Let me say a couple of things to him. We have thought very carefully about this, we have not rushed to judgment and we have considered all aspects of our interests, but I believe that the response that I have announced today is proportionate. Secondly, it is not about being anti-Russian; this is not an anti-Russian statement. The clear desire of the UK Government and people of the UK is to have a close, co-operative and fruitful relationship with the people and Government of Russia, but I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that that relationship must be based on clear rules. Finally, my hon. Friend talked about how "our system" was "protecting" certain individuals, but we have laws of the land, which are guaranteed by independent authorities. Anyone who flouts those laws of the land goes contrary to those independent authorities and will be taken up on that basis.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment as Foreign Secretary and endorse his proportionate response to the current crisis. The Russian Government have said that their constitution prevents them from extraditing Lugovoy, but they have offered a trial in Russia in a Russian court. The right hon. Gentleman might like to consider calling that bluff, but not in the way that the Russians are proposing. He has said correctly that having a trial in a third country would equally come up against the current Russian constitution, but that problem would not arise if a British court were permitted to hold a trial in Russia under British law. We have the precedent of the Lockerbie case in The Hague, where exactly those principles were applied. If the right hon. Gentleman and the Russian Government were interested in finding a way forward, that option should at least be considered.

David Miliband: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who speaks with the authority of a former holder of my office, for his kind words on my appointment. I think he will find that the option he proposes—ingenious though it is—is not open to us, as it does not fall within the sort of creative work that we have been seeking with the Government of Russia. He will also recognise that, as I said in my statement, a proposal to conduct a trial in Russia could open our Government to legal challenge from our own citizens. Under whomever's auspices the trial is carried out, that point carries a large degree of force.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary's calm and measured words should not hide the very tough and bold decision that he has taken. This is the first fight back by any European Foreign Minister against Russia's bullying. When you and I were young men, Mr. Speaker, it was British communists who went to the Kremlin to kneel in front of their master; now it is British capitalists who are already on the airwaves saying, "Don't cause trouble; don't cause trouble". But it is the Russians who are causing the trouble—whether it be on this particular issue or in respect of the British Council, the harassment of our ambassador, Kosovo or trade—and I believe that the whole of Europe will say thank you because at long last a British Foreign Secretary is taking a clear line. Yes, it is a difficult line and, in the light of what my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) said, a controversial line, but it is better to start as we mean to go on and this is a very fine start indeed by someone who will prove to be a fine Foreign Secretary.

David Miliband: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. I look forward to his many contributions to our debates. As always, he speaks with an acute sense of history and an acute sense of the need for all European countries to recognise strong shared interests in this area. It would be wrong to be anything other than firm. No one is seeking to be macho; it is about being firm, clear and proportionate, and that is what we are seeking to do.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I should let the Secretary of State know that, in relation to his appeal for a spirit of non-partisanship, the position on extradition is shared by governing parties from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—by the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru and the Democratic Unionist party. Does he agree that normal countries with normal relations have appropriate extradition proceedings? Although it is not possible to make such arrangements at present, it must be a medium to long-term aim to do so. In relation to the question of European Union co-operation, can he confirm that were Mr. Lugovoy to travel to any European Union country, he would be subject to a European arrest warrant?

David Miliband: I do not want to ruin the hon. Gentleman's career by saying that he has made a good point, but he has. The basic rules of the game that he describes are in the interests of all countries. Given the way in which the Government of Russia have sought to intensify their relations, not just bilaterally with us but across the whole of the EU, I believe that they recognise that. The hon. Gentleman is correct in respect of the position of Mr. Lugovoy, in that if he leaves Russia he will be subject to arrest.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Lab): Diplomacy sometimes requires robustness; it certainly did on this occasion, and there will be widespread public support for the measures announced by the Foreign Secretary. In announcing expulsions to the Russian ambassador, I hope that the Foreign Secretary says that if the Russian Government are minded to retaliate, we shall not be deflected, but we shall continue to see the matter through if necessary. Because the murder in question came after a series of nasty murders in Russia of political dissidents and brave journalists who have criticised the Putin Government, such as Anna Politkovskaya, and because of the difficulties of obtaining rare radioactive isotopes and the skills required to transport them, many people must be worried that Russian state agencies might have played a part in the murder. If any such evidence comes to light—that would be serious, and I am not suggesting that there is necessarily such evidence—does he agree that even more robust measures will be required?

David Miliband: As I have said on two occasions already, I am determined today to stick to the terms of the CPS requirement for extradition. Those apply to Mr. Lugovoy and only to Mr. Lugovoy. Obviously, any other evidence that came to light would have to be considered by the CPS, but that would be a matter for it, not me.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): While I recognise and agree with the robust tones of the Foreign Secretary's statement, I do not want any more than he does to see the outbreak of another cold war. Can he tell the House how many meetings he had with the Russian ambassador here on this subject, and how many conversations he had with his Russian counterpart?

David Miliband: I have spoken twice to my Russian counterpart during my two and a half weeks in office, including earlier today, because I thought it right and courteous to do so before I came to the House. As I said in my statement, the Russian ambassador met the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office on 22 May, and has met him again today. The judicial channels have also been extensively used. If, when I get back to the office, there is further information in relation to the hon. Gentleman's question that I have not given him, I shall write to him with further details.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The death of Alexander Litvinenko was tragic and sinister in equal measure, and his killers deserve to be brought to justice, but does the Foreign Secretary believe that anything he has said today will cause the Russians to amend their constitution and extradite those accused of Litvinenko's murder? If he does not believe there will be any change, why did he make his statement?

David Miliband: Obviously I believe that today's statement will help to advance the three aims that I set out in it; otherwise I would not have made it. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman could not follow that clearly.

I think it important not just to send a signal, which we have done, but to take practical, concrete measures, which we have also done. Those measures are designed to make a particular point to particular people, and I believe that they will do so. They will also lead to further international engagement, which we will undertake in a serious way. However, as a number of Members have pointed out today, there is a wider relationship which needs to be founded on a clear basis of mutual respect. That applies in each case, and also in relation to the broader picture. Today's announcement was designed to advance that relationship, and I believe it is our best hope of doing so.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I join others in welcoming my right hon. Friend's statement. We all hope it will have the effects that he has said are intended to flow from it. I welcome the robust terms in which he said that the heinous crime of murder must be pursued, and that that pursuit could not be set aside for any other ulterior political consideration, but how does he hope to respond to the Russian authorities when they allege hypocrisy on the part of the United Kingdom Government, and in the light of the United Kingdom Government's attitude to the murder of Pat Finucane and others?

David Miliband: Tempting as it is to wander into the terrain offered by the hon. Gentleman, the temptation is not great enough for me to do so. I am sorry that he has not been able to view this case, and the rights and wrongs of it, in and of itself. He indicated support for the Government's position in this instance, and I am grateful for that. I believe that we had no option but to do what we have done, and I hope we can proceed on that basis.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Like many other Members here, I sit on the Council of Europe with Russian members of the Duma. They understand the rule of law, and it is therefore disappointing that the Russian Government do not understand the rule of law that the Foreign Secretary has presented to them. I fully support his announcement, although it is sad that it had to be made.

Last week I was telephoned by a Russian journalist about this issue. I said that we were heading towards a crisis over procedures that were not being followed by Russia. He said he believed that there was a tit for tat: that the Russians had called for the extradition of people from this country and we had refused, and that they failed to see the distinction involved in this particular case. Will the Foreign Secretary comment on that?

David Miliband: There is no doubt that there has been a serious attempt to muddy the waters, but I am afraid the parallel that people have sought to draw does not apply. The protection afforded to citizens here under the European convention on human rights becomes relevant because of people's concerns about the situation in Russia, not because of their concerns about the situation here. This case is also about the situation in Russia, and about the Russian authorities' determination to co-operate with the United Kingdom Government to bring to book someone who is alleged to have committed a very serious crime.

While I hope the hon. Gentleman will phone his Russian friend back and explain to him that it is in the gift of the Russian authorities to ensure that in all cases there are proper procedures and proper protections,

any citizen of this country who is accused of a serious crime in another country can be extradited as long as that does not violate his or her rights, and that is the basis on which we proceed.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Has the Foreign Secretary received any expert advice on the likelihood of a private citizen having been able to obtain a lethal quantity of polonium-210 from anything other than a Government-controlled nuclear agency, and has he suggested to the Russian Government that if they go down the old cold war route of tit-for-tat expulsions he has something else up his sleeve? I do not, of course, expect him to specify what.

David Miliband: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand my reasons for wishing merely to refer him to the content of my statement. It would not be appropriate to go beyond that. We decided what action to take after having looked at the issues in the round. I hope that he accepts that answer.

Points of Order

4.15 pm

Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I seek your guidance on the privilege of Members in this place. During business questions last Thursday, I discussed Greenbelt, a factoring company, and in particular its bullying behaviour. It has sent threatening letters to me and my constituent, Paula Hoogerbrugge. Company representatives also contacted her employers. After business questions, its lawyers copied me into a letter that it sent to you, Mr. Speaker. I believe that that is a part of its bullying strategy to silence me, and I would be grateful if you would confirm that I have the right to raise issues that directly affect my constituents in this place and beyond.

Mr. Speaker: I have not yet received any such letter, and the hon. Gentleman will understand that I would not discuss on the Floor of the House any letters sent to or by me. On privileges, I have always said after a general election and at the opening of a new Session that Members have privilege not outwith but in this Chamber during parliamentary proceedings, but that privilege should always be exercised wisely and consideration should be given to those being criticised.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In respect of the Government's housing policy, the Prime Minister said last Wednesday:

"The Minister for Housing will publish further details next week in a Green Paper to this House."—[*Official Report*, 11 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1450.]

The Leader of the House confirmed that on Thursday, saying:

"As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, we also expect an oral statement next week on the Government's housing policy."—[*Official Report*, 12 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1609.]

Mr. Riddell, an extremely well connected journalist, wrote this morning in *The Times*:

"The word spread quickly in Whitehall on Friday. All was not well with the Green Paper on plans for a big expansion of affordable housing, the flagship of Gordon Brown's new legislative programme…So the planned announcement was being put back from this week, the 18th, until the 23rd or 24th, contrary to what Mr. Brown announced last Wednesday."

Have you, Mr. Speaker, received any indication that the housing statement will not be made this week?

Mr. Speaker: I have received no such information, and the hon. Gentleman must know that the matters he raises are Government matters, and therefore that they are not for the Chair. He can, of course, ask parliamentary questions, both oral and written.

Opposition Day

[17TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Alleged Overseas Corruption

Mr. Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.18 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Serious Fraud Office's (SFO) ongoing investigation into the sale by BAE Systems plc of a military air traffic control system to Tanzania and into payments made to third parties in South Africa and other arms-related inquiries; notes with concern the consequences for the role of the Attorney General of the decision to terminate the SFO investigation into BAE Systems plc and Saudi Arabia and its implications for parliamentary accountability; believes serious damage has been done to the reputation of British business and to the credibility of the Government's campaign against corruption in the developing world; urges the Government to cooperate fully with the United States Department of Justice inquiry into corruption allegations concerning BAE Systems plc and with other international organisations; and calls for increased parliamentary accountability and transparency concerning the Government's dealings with the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

I am delighted to be able to introduce another debate on the investigation of alleged corruption overseas. I have previously introduced two of them—one on 7 February, which was also an Opposition Day debate, and an Adjournment debate on 1 May. Let me first explain and justify why we wish to return to the issue. It is important, as it goes to the heart of arguments about an ethical foreign policy, the rule of law and open government.

Since we last debated these issues, there have been several important developments that we must take account of and discuss. First, there are continuing arguments about the application of the law, which have been clarified by some of the discussions in the Constitutional Affairs Committee, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) chairs. The BBC and *The Guardian* have made revelations or allegations about the wider context of the al-Yamamah project.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentioned *The Guardian*, with which his party is in a conspiracy. *[Interruption.]* Has he the faintest idea of the sort of damage that he and his party are doing to one of the most successful industries in the United Kingdom? Britain's export defence industry employs around 76,000 people. Is he aware that 80 per cent. of those exports emanate from the air sector, and that BAE Systems is the most successful company? His party's motion today is sending a signal to our competitors and commercial adversaries around the world that it does not give a damn for that industry's employees in our country, because we shall ensure that—

Mr. Speaker: Order. Interventions should be brief. The hon. Gentleman is making a speech.

Dr. Cable: As my colleagues behind me have just said, I wish that we were in conspiracy with *The Guardian*. I always tend to regard it as a rather pro-Government newspaper. None the less, that is not the central point.

I want to clarify the fact that we have no objection to British companies selling arms to a friendly country provided that it is done legally, is not subsidised, is on a commercial basis, and satisfies the export control regime's proper tests. If the awaited contracts satisfy those tests, we will have no quarrel with them.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman refers to the Export Control Organisation by implication. Does he agree that for the Defence Export Services Organisation to exist in parallel with it sends entirely the wrong message about arms exports, and that we should tighten up the system to ensure that arms are not sent to unstable regimes, war zones or countries that routinely abuse human rights? Why does he not refer to that in the broader context of his comments?

Dr. Cable: I shall refer to DESO. Certainly, the export control regime needs to be tightened up, as I said from the Front Bench when the matter went through Parliament, but it is as it is. I think the hon. Gentleman's specific point relates to DESO, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury made the interesting observation a few days ago that it is an anachronistic body that should be closed. I shall be interested to hear during the debate how the Government respond to that.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman understand the sort of damage that he is doing to the industry? I have a BAE Systems plant at Samlesbury in my constituency which employs thousands of people in highly paid and skilled jobs. The only people who will get any joy from the Liberal Democrats' motion today are our competitors.

Dr. Cable: I have already given the answer to that question to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth). The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) ascribes to me a power of argument that is flattering. There are questions that must be asked, and I am sure that he would not want us to be uncritical of the arms exports regime, to which we shall refer.

We are updating the arguments, partly to allow for the legal issues, partly to allow for the allegations concerning the al-Yamamah project as a whole, partly to bring up to date the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development inquiry's approach to the question, and partly to bring into the discussion the highly relevant and worrying developments in relation to the United States, which only this weekend insisted on reopening the case, and on British collaboration with that. It would probably be useful to start with an overall approach. When we introduced the debate six months ago, the key issue was the rule of law: whether it was being applied and what the law on bribery and corruption in overseas business meant. We have argued those points, and they continue to be relevant in many respects.

The underlying theme that I wish to develop concerns the broad question of parliamentary accountability and how the new thinking that the Prime Minister has introduced, which is welcome, about greater openness in government and, specifically, greater openness about security matters should apply in this area. The key argument, to which we keep returning in the debate about the Saudi project and al-Yamamah, concerns national security interests. That argument was invoked as the reason for stopping the Serious Fraud Office inquiry, for limiting the information given to the OECD and for not proceeding with or publishing the National Audit Office investigation. It is the argument that is used for not answering most of our parliamentary questions on the subject.

Let me make it clear that just as I and my colleagues respect perfectly open, honest arms exports, we fully understand and respect arguments about national security. On a personal level, as a 30-year-old civil servant I worked in the Foreign Office, and the division that I headed included, among other things, quite an important communist country at the height of the cold war. I was fully indoctrinated in the intelligence process and the Official Secrets Act and honoured its obligations. I have always been perhaps excessively deferential to arguments based on national security. However, some fundamental questions about the workings of the intelligence and security arguments need to continue to be probed, because the Government have used them in unsatisfactory ways.

I have three points on this issue. The first concerns what could be called revelations, but are in fact points from the Government's evidence that was submitted to a recent High Court hearing brought by The Corner House and the Campaign Against Arms Trade. The Government set out—much more specifically and helpfully than when the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General made their statements to Parliament—how the director of the Serious Fraud Office came to the conclusion that he should not proceed on national security grounds. That showed, in quite an extraordinary way, his reluctance to come to that conclusion.

There were three steps. In December 2005, there was a so-called Shawcross exercise by other Departments, which involved, I think, the Prime Minister. The director of the Serious Fraud Office and the Attorney-General rejected the recommendation that the director of the Serious Fraud Office cease to proceed with the inquiry. On 30 September—I do not think that this has been stated to Parliament, but it was stated to the court—a letter from the Cabinet Secretary to the Attorney-General and the head of the Serious Fraud Office explained that our counter-terrorist operations might be affected adversely if he proceeded with his inquiry. At that point, remarkably, not only the head of the Serious Fraud Office but the Attorney-General rejected the advice. On 30 November, the head of the Serious Fraud Office was brought together with the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia and phrases such as "Lives were at risk" were put to him. He did not immediately cease the inquiry; it required three meetings with senior officials and the ambassador before he finally agreed, on 13 December, to do so.

That is taken from the account that the Government have given of the chronology—I am not manufacturing any of it. *[Interruption.]* I have thought carefully about it, and it is all set out here in print. I am surprised that the Minister finds this so difficult; I am not referring to press reports.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr. Kim Howells): I do not find the concept difficult to understand. I said from a sedentary position, "He thought very carefully about it." If it took the director of the Serious Fraud Office three meetings, one would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would have been glad that it was considered seriously and over a length of time.

Dr. Cable: I am glad. It reflects well on the director of the Serious Fraud Office that he took his duties so seriously. It is clear that either he thought that the public interest in proceeding was compelling, and sufficient that he could initially ignore advice about counter-terrorism, or he found the arguments about counter-terrorism unpersuasive.

Subsequently, the director of the SFO said in evidence to the Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, that the one item that persuaded him to change his mind was a memorandum from the Prime Minister, to which was attached a more detailed memorandum from Sir Richard Mottram, who is a security adviser to the Government. He may not have been aware at the time, although it has since been pointed out, that that same civil servant, who I am sure is a man of enormous integrity, was, 20 years previously, private secretary to Michael Heseltine, who set up the meetings that led to the al-Yamamah agreement. Whatever Sir Richard's competence and integrity, he was hardly disinterested.

A problem that has occurred throughout this issue is that of senior people in government—another is the head of the National Audit Office, who was also an MOD official—who, for all their high levels of competence, professionalism and integrity, do not have a disinterested position. Resurrecting my O-level Latin, I have to ask, "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" Who will guard the guards? I think that that is highly relevant to the present context. That is the first question that I wish to pose about the intelligence argument.

The second problem is that the argument that the counter-intelligence issues should deter an investigation sounded to us inherently implausible even six months ago because the relationship with Saudi Arabia is a two-way one, underpinned by a memorandum of understanding—I do not think that that had been made clear before—and is therefore a formal arrangement from which Saudi Arabia benefits as we do. It was unclear why one party to that agreement should imperil a bilaterally mutually advantageous arrangement.

The assertion that that argument was a compelling one has become even less plausible for two reasons. First, the embarrassment that could have been caused to senior Saudis has become history. Prince Bandar has been named and embarrassed, and all the information about his activities has now been published. If the intention was to protect him from that embarrassment,

[Dr. Cable]

it is already history. Secondly, and much more serious, is the decision of the United States Department of Justice to intervene and to investigate. One has to ask why on earth the United States, which is leading the war on terror and which has far more reason to be concerned about maintaining its security relationship with Saudi Arabia than we have, should pursue a potentially embarrassing investigation into the relationships between BAE Systems and Saudi princes.

Mr. David S. Borrow (South Ribble) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman elaborate on the independence of the US Department of Justice and its relationship with the US Administration and the extent to which the Administration could directly influence the Department of Justice on that point?

Dr. Cable: That is a very helpful intervention. The head of the Department of Justice is, I believe, a Mr. Gonzales, who is a political appointee of the Bush Administration. If the Bush Administration had any interest in safeguarding their carefully nurtured security relationship with the Saudis, surely that would have manifested itself.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman intervened, because he made an extraordinary remark reported in the press this morning. Apparently, following a meeting with Lord Drayson, the Minister responsible for defence export sales, he urged the Government not to co-operate with the Americans in their inquiry. It is absolutely extraordinary to say that we should put at risk our most important bilateral relationship on intelligence and security matters to protect the Saudis from further embarrassment. I can only hope that hon. Gentleman was not speaking for the Minister.

Mr. Borrow: May I clarify? The comment from me in *The Guardian* this morning came not from a discussion with the journalist from *The Guardian*, but was an interpretation of comments that I made to another journalist from my local newspaper. Those comments were interpreted without my consent and without any discussion between myself and the journalist from *The Guardian*, and the interpretation does not reflect the comments I made to the *Lancashire Evening Post*.

Dr. Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his clarification, and I hope that he speaks for the Government. I will take it as read that the Government will give their maximum co-operation to our chief ally in this matter.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Has it not crossed the hon. Gentleman's mind that American interest in the subject might be due to the fact that it would have liked the contracts that BAE Systems secured, and that it would do a great deal to destabilise British industry and tens of thousands of jobs across Lancashire?

Dr. Cable: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that President Bush and his Administration are putting at risk counter-terrorist operations to placate American companies? I do not know enough about the United States to know how perverted its values are, but he seems to be making an extraordinary case.

Mr. Hendrick: I do not think that the issue was a consideration for President Bush, or that intelligence between the United States and Saudi Arabia would have been affected. Obviously, the intention was to get to the bottom of a commercial arrangement, because it is in certain American companies' commercial interests to see BAE Systems struggle.

Dr. Cable: I do not understand the logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument at all. Why on earth should the intelligence arrangements between Britain and Saudi Arabia be compromised, but not those between the United States and Saudi Arabia? That makes absolutely no sense.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should not lose all sense of proportion, and that we must remember what the issue should surely be about? Does he not remember the once much-lauded phrase, "an ethical foreign policy"? If we are to have such a policy, and properly regulated arms exports, which my party and I support, surely there must be the highest standards of probity, and surely inquiries should not be stopped at the whim of the Government.

Dr. Cable: That is right, but in a way I am more positive and optimistic than the hon. Gentleman; the new Prime Minister said very clearly that he wants more transparency in government, and a more ethical foreign policy. I hope that he is as good as his word. If he is, this is an opportunity to demonstrate it.

Mr. Evans: I do not know what the Liberal Democrats have against BAE Systems specifically, or military manufacturing generally, because during the general election they threatened to stop the next tranche of Eurofighters if they came to power. Again, that would cost thousands of jobs. What do they have against BAE Systems in my constituency?

Dr. Cable: I have nothing against that company at all, and I welcome its continued commercial activity—providing, of course, that it abides by the law, as we all must.

Let me move beyond the arguments about intelligence to specific issues that have arisen in the past six months. The first relates to the legal position, and the differing views of the former Attorney-General and the Serious Fraud Office. As I said, those views were brought out by the Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. When the then Attorney-General made his statement to the House of Lords, it was said that the arguments for ceasing the investigation were not simply about national security. He has said that there were severe technical and legal difficulties in bringing any prosecution. Many distinguished people have pitched in and supported that argument, and I seem to remember that they included the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), the Conservative spokesman, who is a

distinguished lawyer in his own right. He put on his legal hat, as he put it, and concluded that

"On the face of it, there can be no prosecution if there was an agreement to give commission payments to certain agents of the Saudi Government, with the full knowledge of the Saudi Government, as part of the overall contractual arrangements."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 884.]

I am not a lawyer, but there seems to be an element of common sense to the idea that it is rather difficult to apply the law when one of the most senior members of the Government are involved. The problem is that the argument does not seem to have persuaded the head of the Serious Fraud Office, who persists in holding a contrary view. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed conducted his inquiry, he specifically said to the head of the SFO that the Attorney-General

"stated that in his view, as opposed to yours, the ground for ceasing the investigation was that it could not lead to a successful prosecution."

The head of the SFO, who had had several months in which to reflect, and who had no doubt received legal advice, replied:

"He certainly took that view. I took a slightly different view. I took the view that I would prefer to continue the investigation, to obtain the evidence, before making a final decision".

It is important that we understand whether it is the Attorney-General who is right or the head of the Serious Fraud Office, a very senior official, who, unlike many of the other people involved in the argument, has no political axe to grind, so we must take his views seriously. If the Attorney-General, the Government and the Conservative spokesman are right, there are serious implications. The first is that we have a highly defective law governing bribery in overseas countries, which in many cases simply cannot be applied. That raises the question as to why the head of the SFO is spending taxpayers' money pursuing further investigations, which, among other things, include South Africa, where the alleged recipient of money is none other than the vice-president, and where precisely the same argument about principles and agents could be advanced as is being advanced in the case of Saudi Arabia. If the law is defective, do the Government propose to change it? There was nothing in the sketch of the Queen's Speech that indicated that an improvement was coming, but if the Government really believe that the law is inadequate and cannot be applied, do they have any plans to change it.?

Mr. Borrow: Will the hon. Gentleman elaborate on the changes to the law in 2001 and the extent to which that has influenced the debate, the extent to which events took place before and after the change in the law, and whether we are considering matters pre-2001 or post-2001?

Dr. Cable: I have not seen the evidence, so I do not know the answer to that question. I think that most people assume that there is an element of both. Certainly the 2001 legislation was a genuine attempt to incorporate the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention into British law. The problem that we now seem to have is that it cannot be applied, or certainly cannot be applied in cases where major figures in a recipient Government are involved. That is the issue. I do not know the answer and I hope that the Solicitor-General might be able to clarify that.

The Solicitor-General (Vera Baird): The hon. Gentleman asserted some time ago—I have taken this time to track it down—that it was only the Select Committee's inquiry that disclosed the difference between Mr. Wardle and the Attorney-General. That is utterly wrong. The Attorney-General disclosed that difference of opinion about a point of law in the House of Lords when he first went there within minutes of the director of the SFO making his announcement. The hon. Gentleman should know that a process has been under way for some time to try to improve the corruption law, the Law Commission is seized of the job of doing exactly that and will produce a consultation document later this year, and that we hope for a draft Bill to be attached to it shortly thereafter with a view to legislating. It is not that the law cannot be applied, but it must be improved on and it will be.

Dr. Cable: That is a helpful clarification. On the first point, of course the hon. and learned Lady is right that the difference of view surfaced earlier. I simply mentioned it because the head of the SFO persisted with his arguments several months after the event, presumably having reflected a great deal upon it. Her final comment is helpful and positive.

The first major set of developments relates to those arguments, the second relates to the allegations—if that is what they are—by the BBC and *The Guardian* about the fuller aspects of the al-Yamamah inquiry. When I first mentioned the dreaded name *The Guardian* a few moments ago, several hon. Members jumped to their feet with outrage that we should be giving any credibility to this issue at all. However, although that newspaper is not particularly friendly to the Liberal Democrats, it is a serious newspaper, which gives the full power of editorial support to this particular story. But more important than that is the role of the BBC, which did, after all, lose a director-general and a chairman because it had not done its homework correctly on an important and sensitive issue a few years ago. I find it difficult to believe that it would have lent its credibility to a story of this kind unless it had carefully sourced and checked it.

No one has suggested that there is a contrary version of events, so let us assume for the moment that in the case of the al-Yamamah contract, what happened is broadly what has been described in that account. It means that, effectively, there are two sets of corruption allegations. Perhaps corruption is too loaded a word in this context, so let us say that there are two sets of problems. The Serious Fraud Office investigated the first problem, which dates back to a specific complaint. It originated in Robert Lee International, an intermediate company, which provided services to the Saudi royal family. There was a whistleblower, Edward Cunningham, who went to the SFO with his evidence, which was the basis on which the inquiry was launched.

The investigation by the BBC and *The Guardian* makes a much bigger and more substantial allegation, and it reaches to the heart of government: it is not simply a matter of a relationship between a company

[Dr. Cable]

and a named individual. The allegation is that £1 billion was paid over a 10-year period at three-monthly intervals into one of two accounts in Riggs bank in the United States under the name of Prince Bandar. He is a very important figure in the Saudi regime. He was named first not in that investigation: I mentioned his name in an Adjournment debate a few weeks before, because it was clear that, where he was concerned, some extraordinary developments had occurred. It had been pointed out to me that, for example, in the period since July 2006, he visited this country 14 times in a private jet that landed at an RAF air base, and that he had six meetings with Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials and undisclosed meetings with others.

That is clearly somebody who was at the heart of our official relationship with the Saudi Government. There exists a very close relationship between an individual and the British Government, and the same individual is named in the context of the very large payments in this case. I stand to be corrected, but I understand that Prince Bandar is currently the head of intelligence in Saudi Arabia, and that he has held major roles in that Government, including that of ambassador to the United States.

If the accusations cited are in any way correct, they raise major issues about the role of our Government and their conduct and accountability. We are all operating in the dark, and I have no other evidence, so let me describe what it is argued took place in the context of Prince Bandar and the payments. The House will forgive me if I read for a few moments, because the process is complex and we all need to understand it:

"According to legal sources familiar with the records, BAE Systems made cash transfers to Prince Bandar every three months for 10 years or more. BAE drew the money from a confidential account held at the Bank of England that had been set up to facilitate the Al-Yamamah deal...Both BAE and the government's arms sales department, the Defence Export Services Organisation (Deso),"

which we have just discussed,

"allegedly had drawing rights on the funds, which were held in a special Ministry of Defence account run by the government banker, the paymaster general. Those close to Deso say regular payments were drawn down by BAE and despatched to Prince Bandar's account at Riggs...Under the terms of a previously unknown MoD instruction from the department's permanent secretary, Sir Frank Cooper, the payment deal would have required Deso authorisation."

It is just conceivable that that is all fantasy, dreamed up by somebody in the bath trying to sell a few more newspapers, but that is improbable. It is a well sourced story that appears entirely consistent with what many independent sources have argued in the past. If the story is true, or even approximately true, it raises issues about two major arms of government. First, there is the financial arm, which is the Treasury and the Bank of England. In the past, I asked the then Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he would explain his role in the matter, but of course, he transferred the questions to the Ministry of Defence, arguing that it was nothing to do with him. He has also said publicly that he knew nothing about it. I am sure that he did not, because the arrangement would not have operated at that level. As has been acknowledged in parliamentary answers, an account was run through the Bank of England. That raises important questions of public accountability about who monitored that account, who was responsible for it and what their level of seniority was, and we deserve answers.

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman identify what crime he is saying has been committed?

Dr. Cable: No crime has been committed that I am aware of. If enormous sums of money are swilling through Government Departments, surely it is an elementary requirement of our system of government that somebody is accountable to Parliament to explain that and to answer parliamentary questions. The Opposition parties should ask those questions, rather than trying to suppress them.

The heart of the matter does not lie in the Bank of England or the Treasury; it lies in DESO. The account that I have quoted went on to say:

"Before the investigation was abandoned, the SFO interviewed Alan Garwood, head of DESO. Sources close to the arms sales unit say that he and...the commercial director of the Saudi project were questioned about the reasons for authorising the payments."

In order to make sense of what happened on the al-Yamamah project, we need to know much more about DESO. As far as I understand it, DESO operates in an extraordinary way. It is paid a fee of 2 per cent. of the value of transactions by the Saudi authorities in order to conduct business on behalf of a British company. It is a Government Department that is headed up by somebody who is on secondment from a company linked to BAE Systems earning a fee from a foreign Government for commercial work. It may be that that is entrepreneurial activity in government that we should applaud, but surely somebody should explain the mechanisms and be accountable for them. Is 2 per cent. too much or too little? Where are the accounts relating to that extraordinary business?

What is at issue here is a question of parliamentary accountability that we have a duty to pursue. In my view, nobody has more of a duty to pursue it than the Public Accounts Committee. I am sorry that he is not here, but the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) intervened very early in my speech on the last occasion we considered the matter to explain why the Public Accounts Committee did not wish to publish the original report into the al-Yamamah project, which he admitted that he had never read. None the less, he felt very strongly that the PAC should not publish that report. He said that

"the National Audit Office is concerned with the Government and not private companies".—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 863.]

However, we now know that the Government are critically involved in all aspects of the operation, so, of course, the PAC must reopen the issue and investigate it as well as referring to its inquiry.

As a result of the exchanges involving the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow), we have already touched on the third new issue that has arisen, which relates to the US Department of Justice. The United States is a close ally, but it also has strict laws governing overseas corruption—they were introduced rather sooner than ours in the Foreign Corrupt

Practices Act 1977. Inquiries have been initiated, and perhaps they were prompted by competitor companies of BAE Systems—it is possible that there is a commercial motivation.

As far as the journalists who are looking at the matter can establish, the motivation is concern not with the big al-Yamamah architecture, which I have just described, but with a narrow set of transactions—the so-called red diamond payments—under which BAE Systems paid money for services, such as hospitality, for its friends and which flowed through US jurisdiction on this occasion. We do not know whether there is any basis to those inquiries, but it is surely necessary that the British Government give an absolute commitment to maximum co-operation, which means the sharing of files and the evidence that they acquired, because how else is our reciprocal set of obligations with the Americans to be honoured?

The fourth new issue that has arisen relates to our relationship with the OECD. At its March meeting, two months after our original debate, the OECD working group on bribery reached the following conclusions:

"the OECD Working Group on Bribery reaffirmed its serious concerns about the United Kingdom's discontinuation of the BAE Al Yamamah investigation and outlined the continued shortcomings in UK Anti-Bribery legislation. It urged the UK to remedy these shortcomings as quickly as possible and decided to conduct a further examination of the UK's efforts to fight bribery."

The OECD, in a peer group assessment of our progress, is highly critical of what the Government have done in this department, and will no doubt report in due course.

The aspect of the OECD investigation that leaves a particularly nasty taste is the allegations that have been made within the OECD itself that the Government did not pursue this in a completely detached manner. When I raised this in the Adjournment debate, the Foreign Office Minister who responded gave a very robust reply in which he categorically denied all the dirty tricks allegations that have been made, and did so with such conviction that I completely accepted what he said. None the less, a month later, officials from the OECD told the press—this is from a different newspaper, not the wicked *Guardian* again but *The Independent*—

"'The dirty tricks boys were all at work', said a senior OECD official who asked not to be named. 'There was a lot of pressure on a lot of people.'"

I completely accepted the Government's assurances on this. However, will they explain what they are doing to assure the OECD, whose officials continue to argue that their reputations are being traduced by British officials, that they are pursuing their relations with it in a proper way?

Finally, let me look forward. Much of this is history. Things have happened in the past that are perhaps regrettable and do not comply with the standards that we currently expect in terms of anti-corruption behaviour. Nevertheless, it is possible for the Government to turn a corner on all this and to pursue their future investigations in a way that reflects the spirit, as well as the letter, of the original OECD provisions. Part of the proof of how the Government are approaching this will be how they deal with their future investigations; I think that six are lined up. I shall briefly enumerate them so that Ministers can indicate whether they are still live and whether they will be pursued by the head of the Serious Fraud Office.

The first case relates to Chile and the accusation of the £1 million payment to General Pinochet that was unearthed by a Chilean judge pursuing tax evasion. General Pinochet is of course dead, and was presumably the principal witness in that inquiry, so is the case still being pursued? The allegations in relation to Romania relate to the £7 million commission on a £116 million naval contract. The case in South Africa concerns a much bigger contract, where the difficulty is that a very senior figure in the South African Government is involved.

The case in Tanzania is particularly important because it relates to the full thrust of Government policy in Africa, which is to encourage good governance. The original corruption allegations related to a large payment by BAE Systems on an air traffic control arrangement that was opposed at the time by the current Prime Minister and the then overseas development Secretary. What has made it topical is that the alleged middleman, a Mr. Vithlani, has subsequently been named in Tanzania in accord with two other major corruption inquiries relating to a presidential jet and a military truck. Those who are concerned with honesty and probity in Tanzania are looking anxiously at whether the British Government will pursue their own inquiries.

In Jersey, an investigation was proceeding for several years into large payments made by Sheikh Hamad bin Jasim bin Jaber ath-Thani, who is Qatar's Foreign Minister. I understand that those investigations have now been discontinued. It was alleged in the Jersey press that that happened because of pressure from Britain, but that is entirely hearsay. However, it is important to appreciate whether the Qatar inquiry is proceeding.

Those are past inquiries, and as several hon. Members with constituency interests have intervened to say, there are potentially big contracts on the way. It seems to me that there is one simple way in which BAE Systems, with Government support, may ensure that the taint hitherto associated with many arms contracts is removed from any contract achieved or jobs secured. The mechanism to do that, which has been suggested by Transparency International, means that we should put the past on one side, and have an arrangement whereby an independent organisation, such as Transparency International or someone nominated by it, can vet contracts in order to certify that they have been achieved without bribery, and to establish that new contracts, whatever may have happened in the past, are entirely above suspicion. That seems to me a perfectly plausible and praiseworthy initiative, and I shall be interested to hear the Government's reaction to it.

Looking forward, if the Government pursue their investigations into those other allegations, which I think are still live, and if a mechanism can be found to ensure that any accusation of bribery is removed from future contracts, it is possible to move on from the episode in question. I hope that the Government will take into account the fact that we are in new territory—

Mr. Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cable: I am just coming to a conclusion, so let me finish.

What is required is a major step forward in terms of parliamentary accountability, in which the Select Committee on Public Accounts and other Select Committees of the House are able to investigate, in a more transparent way than in the past, many of the accusations that have been made and which appear to have substance.

5.2 pm

The Solicitor-General (Vera Baird): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"supports the Government's stance against international corruption; welcomes the action it is taking to tackle it; and recognises that the decision to discontinue the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) investigation into BAE Systems plc and Saudi Arabia was taken by the Director of the SFO alone for reasons of national and international security.".

When the Liberal Democrats speak, money swills through Departments. The word "implausible" can be used liberally about the Prime Minister, the director of the Serious Fraud Office, the Attorney-General, senior civil servants and—very nearly—the Select Committee on Public Accounts. Prosecutions are stopped on a whim, and unsourced allegations from nameless people in newspapers are enough to rebut what Ministers of State have said in this House. An evidence-free zone surrounds the Liberal Democrat Front Benchers on this issue, and today we have heard a barrel-load of conspiracy theories that would disgrace a juvenile anorak.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to this debate. On the fundamental question of the Serious Fraud Office investigation nothing has changed, although we have had a number of debates on the matter in this House. I am going to take the opportunity to deal in some detail with the basis of SFO director's decision to stop the investigation in question, since clearly—let me put it as politely as I can—somebody still has questions about it.

The decision was taken precisely according to the requirements of our current, unwritten constitution. No Government have, to date, changed these requirements, which have existed for a very long time—probably as long ago as when the Liberal Democrats were last in office, a period which is into three figures and growing. A question may emerge whether it will subsist for 100 years to come, which is at least the length of time it would take for the Liberals to get back into power on today's showing—if anyone ever trusts such a totally disreputable set of peddlers of appalling scandal. The decision was taken by Robert Wardle, the director of the SFO. The SFO had been investigating for two and a half years whether officials were bribed to win the al-Yamamah contract for BAE Systems. Its view was that approximately another 18 months of investigation were necessary to decide whether there would be a prosecution. Unlike the other prosecuting authorities, the SFO is an investigatory body too.

The then Attorney-General, Lord Goldsmith, agreed with Mr. Wardle's decision to halt the investigation. Lord Goldsmith had undertaken a Shawcross exercise before the decision. That exercise is undertaken when the Attorney-General consults ministerial colleagues on the public interest implications of proceeding with a prosecution—or, in the case that we are considering, an investigation. It is a well established and wholly legitimate procedure, which Sir Hartley Shawcross articulated in 1951, when he was Attorney-General.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

The Solicitor-General: I shall not give way during my account of the facts. After that, I shall do so.

David Howarth *rose—*

The Solicitor-General: As I said, I shall give the hon. Gentleman ample opportunity to intervene later, but I shall go through the facts first because so many attempts have been made to obfuscate what truly happened that it is vital that the public understand who is firing with ridiculously bent bullets from the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Wardle explained to the Constitutional Affairs Committee the nature of the Attorney-General's superintendence role over the SFO. He said that he would brief the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General on specific cases as a matter of routine—perhaps complex ones or those in which the public interest was likely to be important. He said that he did so in the al-Yamamah case and that the Attorney-General first initiated a Shawcross exercise in December 2005, consulting various Ministers. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) tried to make something sinister of that, so let me make clear what happened. At that stage, views were expressed about the commercial implications that might flow from the investigation, but the Attorney-General concluded that it should proceed.

Let me mention the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention on combating bribery of foreign public officials in international business transactions, which we signed in 1997. Article 5 provides that investigating and prosecuting the bribery of foreign public officials shall

"not be influenced by considerations of national economic interest"

or

"the potential effect upon relations with another State",

hence the decision in December 2005 that commercial interests should not be relied on as a reason for stopping the SFO investigation.

In 2006, Mr. Wardle said that evidential issues and the public interest re-emerged as questions. He ultimately decided that, although he would like to continue the investigation to ascertain whether charges could have been brought, he came to know of issues that made him reach the following decision:

"To continue the investigation was in my view likely to cause grave damage to the public interest, to national security, and I fully accept that the result of the investigation would be uncertain."

Before that decision, Mr. Wardle consulted the Attorney-General, who received further views on the public interest in the form of a memorandum from the Prime Minister, which Mr. Wardle saw. Of course, I

took no part in that decision, but I have now seen the memorandum from the former Prime Minister. It makes clear his view that developments in the SFO investigation could have given rise to a genuine and immediate risk of a collapse in UK-Saudi security, intelligence and diplomatic co-operation and that that was likely to have seriously negative consequences for the UK public interest in terms of national security and our highest foreign policy objectives in the middle east. The then Prime Minister was clear that the decision was a matter for the independent prosecuting authority, but felt that he would fail in his duty if he did not bring those issues to the Attorney-General's attention.

The former Prime Minister set out the centrality of Saudi Arabia and co-operation with its authorities to our efforts to protect British lives, and the risk of such co-operation being withdrawn. The document is some pages long and it goes into specific detail, which makes it compelling. It also deals with defence and foreign policy issues and states that the Secretary of State for Defence confirms the defence issues, and that both he and the Foreign Secretary share the Prime Minister's overall assessment of the damaging impact of the SFO investigation. That assessment is formed on the basis of advice from the Government's most senior national security official advisers. The Prime Minister's minute was accompanied by further assessments from very senior officials, including Sir Richard Mottram.

David Howarth *rose—*

The Solicitor-General: Wait for it.

David Howarth: Will the Solicitor-General give way?

The Solicitor-General: I will not.

Those are not documents that could weigh lightly. Mr. Wardle told the Constitutional Affairs Committee that he had two subsequent conversations with the ambassador. Let me turn to that issue, because it is a subject of some—forgive me for using the term—scurrilous criticism of Mr. Wardle. What he did was to see those documents. He subsequently had two conversations with the ambassador, on 8 and 12 December—he had already had one conversation about the issues. At those meetings, he was able to probe the issues as much as he wished. Mr. Wardle is a professional lawyer at the head of an investigation and prosecuting body. I would expect him to be able to probe expertly the ambassador's position not only on the centrality of Saudi Arabia but on the likelihood of the breakdown of relations, which would offer danger to national security.

Mr. Wardle told the Constitutional Affairs Select Committee:

> "I was satisfied, on what I had been shown and certainly the conversations I had with our ambassador...that the co-operation would have been withdrawn. In fact...I would have been satisfied it would have been. Certainly there was a very serious risk."

Asked by the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), a Committee member, whether he thought everyone else would agree or whether others might not, Mr. Wardle said:

> "I do not think it was finely balanced."

Mr. Wardle was asked about Saudi benefits from an exchange of intelligence—the very point in a thunderstorm of allegations from the Liberal Democrats that the hon. Member for Twickenham raised. Mr. Wardle said that the question "Were the Saudis bluffing?" was something that he went into in his conversations with the ambassador. From what he was told, they were not.

Mr. Wardle has been clear that the decision was his. While he properly consulted the Attorney-General in his statutory superintendence role, he has made it clear that he came under no improper pressure from the Attorney-General. Mr. Wardle has said, again to the Committee that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) chairs, that he had "no problem with the way the government has handled this" and that the then Attorney-General had acted "absolutely professionally" and played "with a straight bat".

Mr. Wardle of course knew the state of the investigation, the input of expertise, the time that the SFO had already devoted to it and the £1.3 million estimated cost. He certainly understands the public interest in prosecuting corruption, since that is what he spends most of his life doing. Many of his cases are overseas corruption investigations. He has, with Lord Goldsmith, recently obtained blockbuster funding from the Treasury to investigate oil-for-food corruption in connection with the Saddam regime in Iraq. Mr. Wardle accepted in evidence to CASC that the decision had damaged the SFO's reputation for dealing with corruption. He will therefore have quite obviously taken that danger into account as well. There can be no doubt that he was in the best possible position to balance competing considerations and come to a conclusion as to where the public interest lay.

Lord Goldsmith saw the same documents, knew the investigation and obviously understood the purpose and need for corruption prosecutions for the greater good. He agreed with Robert Wardle's decision to halt the investigation. Lord Goldsmith was concerned that any prosecution might not succeed. Mr. Wardle would have preferred to try for further evidence and said only that the outcome was uncertain, and so they differed on that. Mr. Wardle took the decision. The Attorney-General's difference was on whether, since our law of corruption involves the need to show payment to an agent without the approval of the principal, the payments to senior officials in this case might have been made to, or with the knowledge or consent of, the relevant principals—a matter of evidence. In the event, this difference of view was not tested, because of Mr. Wardle's decision to halt the investigation on national security grounds.

The process that I have described is exactly what our constitution requires to happen, and the decision is evidenced by all concerned to have been taken independently, on information from a variety of sources that led Mr. Wardle to conclude as he did. I have set this out extensively because there has been innuendo upon innuendo, yet when the facts are thus set out, the innuendo is shown to be without any foundation. I hope now that it will now stop.

Mr. Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): The hon. and learned Lady has referred extensively to the Select Committee. She has somehow implied that for the Select Committee to ask Mr. Wardle, who was an excellent witness before the Committee, a whole series of questions about how the decision had been arrived

[Mr. Alan Beith]

at—very similar questions to those that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) has asked today—involved some kind of innuendo. Surely asking questions is an entirely proper means, both in that process and in this debate, of establishing the facts of the matter.

The Solicitor-General: I have suggested absolutely no such thing. I have relied on the evidence. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that Mr. Wardle was an excellent witness. I have spoken to him, and I would expect him to be an excellent witness and a wholly reliable figure. I see the right hon. Gentleman nodding. Can he not curb the excessive desire of those on his Front Bench to refer to what Mr. Wardle said as "implausible", when his own view conflicts with that by finding him an impressive witness? In my view, the inquiry by the Constitutional Affairs Committee was penetrating and drew out essentially what I have just put forward—namely, that this decision was taken independently after a great deal of independent thought by the expert who was best placed to take the decision.

Mr. Evans: The Solicitor-General has just stated that she hopes the mud-slinging and constant returning to this issue will stop. Does she accept that if that does not happen, it will have a commercial impact on BAE Systems, its workers and its future orders? Carrying on in this manner is jeopardising thousands of jobs.

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman makes his own point.

David Howarth: There was one particular part of the story that did not come out in the evidence to the Constitutional Affairs Committee, but which did come out in the Government's written case in the judicial review. This involved the separate exercise at the end of September 2006 in which the Attorney-General's office received further representations from the Cabinet Secretary about the public interest and raised the possibility of Saudi Arabia's co-operation on counter-terrorism being prejudiced. Nevertheless, at that stage the Attorney-General decided that the investigation should continue. That point did not come out in the evidence to the Select Committee. What precisely changed between 30 September and the separate exercise in December?

The Solicitor-General: I have told the House what forces prevailed when the decision was taken. Surely that is the important point. I have no doubt that issues were raised, re-raised and considered, but it is clear that at some point this came to a head and a decision had to be taken on whether we should jeopardise our national security.

The OECD has scrutinised the decision and the basis on which it was taken. The SFO and other UK authorities have co-operated fully with the OECD. Indeed, the OECD issued a press release expressing its appreciation of the openness with which we have given our explanations, although hon. Members would not suspect that for a minute, given what we have heard from the Liberal Democrats today. We are satisfied that the decision made by Mr. Wardle was compatible with the OECD anti-bribery convention. We do not believe that the convention was intended to stop national authorities acting to protect their national security.

Opposition Members referred earlier to a legal challenge. That legal challenge brought by the Corner House resulted in the view that we were entitled to act to protect our national security—that must be a commonplace to everyone but the Liberal Democrats—which was borne out by Mr. Justice Collins, who refused permission for judicial review. He said the challenge was "bound to fail" on the basis that

"it is clear that national security must prevail and that no State could be expected to take action which jeopardises the security of the State or the lives of its citizens".

The claimants have now sought to renew their application for permission at an oral hearing, but the SFO will continue to resist the challenge. The head of the OECD Secretariat, Professor Michael Pieth, has himself apparently accepted that the OECD convention allows cases to be stopped on national security grounds, although he added the rider

"in an extreme case of necessity".

I am not sure on what basis he chose to add that qualification, but it should not be thought, asserted or pretended that the OECD has reached any finding that the halting of the SFO investigation amounts to a breach of the convention. It has not. It is, in any event, not the job of the OECD to inquire into individual cases or to act as any sort of judicial body. The UK remains a strong supporter of the OECD convention, and the UK authorities are co-operating with the OECD's review, which is about our anti-corruption laws in general.

Mention has been made of an investigation in the United States. The Home Office, as the central authority for these purposes, has received a request for mutual legal assistance from the United States. That request is receiving appropriate consideration in accordance with procedures and the relevant law. Any decision on that request will ultimately be a matter for the Home Secretary. Beyond that, I cannot comment at this stage.

I should like to speak about the future. I obviously accept that this case has been controversial—although not, I venture to suggest, as controversial as the Liberal Democrats would have us believe by stirring it up. I have tried to be as open as I possibly could be with the House today about the basis on which the director of the SFO took his decision. The same applies to the former Attorney-General and Solicitor-General, who went straight to Parliament when the decision was made, and they have been equally open in the numerous debates that have taken place in both Houses.

I think we need to consider, however, whether there are ways in which these issues can have brighter light thrown on them, perhaps at an earlier stage. As the House knows, the Prime Minister has committed the Government to a programme of constitutional reform, with the express intent of being as open and transparent as possible and of divesting the Government of powers that can be exercised by Parliament or with closer parliamentary supervision. It is well worth considering whether other ways can be found of informing Parliament

about cases of this sort—in particular, those cases where decisions are taken on the basis of sensitive intelligence that cannot be made public.

I imagine that the Government would be in an altogether more comfortable position at large if we were able to say that, notwithstanding the total personal integrity and total constitutional propriety with which this advice was given, we had exposed material that underpinned it to a thoroughly security-checked group of Members of Parliament of all parties. That would have to be a group of people in whom obviously the public, but equally the security services and the prosecution authorities, had confidence.

I can say that the former Attorney-General himself provided information about such a case, in which a similar decision had been made—similar in the sense that it was a decision not to prosecute in the public interest. He recently gave to the Intelligence and Security Committee some background material that contextualised the decision and the legal reasoning behind it. It may be that more use could be made of such a mechanism or other options may be available.

The House will further know that, following the programme of constitutional reform set out in the Green Paper "The Governance of Britain", we will shortly issue a consultation document on the role of the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General: they have identical powers and responsibilities, save that on the current configuration they are accountable to different Houses. One aspect of that consultation will concern the Attorney-General's responsibility for criminal prosecutions, and the Law Officers' accountability to Parliament. As part of that consultation, the Attorney-General and I will be happy to consider any proposals on such topics.

I should remind the House of what strong action the Government are taking against corruption world-wide. First, we are committed to reform of our law. That is far from straightforward. A draft Bill was subjected to pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses in 2003—I was on that Committee, and if there is to be blame for delay, I shall have to share some of it as a Back Bencher, as we did not support that form of the Bill. We thought that it could be improved, and we sent it back. The Government responded, but the issues are hugely difficult, and we have asked the Law Commission to research the issues and prepare a draft Bill. That will include consideration of the experience of other countries that have implemented international conventions in this area. We have asked the Law Commission to prioritise that, and have made additional resources available to expedite it. It aims to produce a consultation document this autumn, with a report and draft Bill in 2008.

Meanwhile, let me set out the SFO's vigorous pursuit of international corruption. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East will say more later about broader steps that we have taken and are taking. The SFO, however, is pursuing a large number of cases, including some relating to BAE Systems.

One such case concerns allegations of corruption in relation to a joint venture within the Czech Republic between BAE Systems and Saab to lease fighter planes to the Czech air force in 2002. The Swedes have started their own investigation, with the assistance of the SFO. On 10 May this year, the SFO called for a meeting at the headquarters of Eurojust at The Hague, with members of the Czech investigation team. The SFO tabled a proposal for a more co-ordinated approach to aid the investigation, which was agreed. Since then, there has been active co-operation, and meetings of the Czechs, Swedish prosecutors and the SFO took place last month in London.

The SFO is also investigating allegations of corruption, again in relation to BAE Systems, within the state of Romania. The case concerns a contract to sell refurbished frigates to the Romanian navy in 2002. Again, excellent support has been afforded by the Romanian authorities and a letter of request has resulted in a visit to Romania by SFO investigators, during which excellent co-operation was achieved.

An investigation is also taking place of a contract awarded by the Government of Tanzania in 1993 to upgrade its air traffic control systems. The contract was with Siemens Plessey, which was acquired by British Aerospace in 1998. The Prevention of Corruption Bureau of Tanzania has commenced its own investigation. The SFO has given considerable technical and legal support and advice to that body. SFO lawyers with junior counsel, an investigator and an experienced Ministry of Defence police officer visited Tanzania in May. Three members of the PCB are currently working on the investigation and are spending July at the office of the SFO, where they are receiving support and training.

Mr. Hendrick: Given that the Government and the SFO are pursuing all these additional investigations with regard to BAE Systems, does it not seem ridiculous that the Opposition should make such a big fuss over the al-Yamamah deal? As my hon. and learned Friend clearly outlines, the Government's commitment is forthright.

The Solicitor-General: The Government's anti-corruption commitment is well known everywhere except on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench.

Another investigation concerns corruption in South Africa relating to the sale in 1999 of Hawk and Gripen jets to the South African air force. In June, an SFO team visited Pretoria and held a series of meetings with the national police authority, getting strong support.

The SFO is currently investigating nine other overseas corruption cases, not including the oil-for-food investigation, for which special ring-fenced funding has been agreed. The SFO mutual legal assistance section is giving sustained support to investigations in a number of other jurisdictions, including Zambia and Kenya as well as to the judicial inquiry in Uganda investigating allegations of mismanagement surrounding the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The SFO is widely acknowledged as a lead player in international investigations and provides support and training to anti-fraud and anti-corruption bodies in less developed jurisdictions. It is entirely right that the BAE Systems decision is contextualised in that way.

Finally, Mr. Wardle and the former Attorney-General and Solicitor-General, in respectively taking and advising on, in good faith, a decision, which it was

[The Solicitor-General]

their duty to do, were bound to land in controversy, probably whichever way they decided. If there are ways in which, in particular, democratically elected representatives of other parties can be more fully informed on such occasions, it may prevent scandalmongering of the kind that we have seen today, and more broadly it will be in the public interest.

In the ways that I have proposed or in other ways, we are open to suggestion in the spirit of openness and transparency that underpins the Green Paper "The Governance of Britain". Now that I—like my predecessors and those of my noble Friend the Attorney-General—have done my best to be as open and transparent as it is possible to be within the terms of the current constitutional arrangements, I hope we can look forward to fair input and constructive support in our quest—in this area of the law as well as others—for a sound constitution for the 21st century.

5.30 pm

Mr. Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I congratulate the Solicitor-General on her new role.

The motion is very widely drawn. It is much too widely drawn for our liking. It is too scattergun in its approach, and, dare I say, plenty of heat and too little light are emanating from the Liberal Democrats. The motion is too vague to receive our support today; however, we think it appropriate to debate the issue of dealing with overseas corruption and to review past events, not least in an attempt to establish a new consensus on the pressing issue of addressing bribery and corruption. In that context, I should make it clear that the Conservative party believes there is a need for further and clearer legislation to tackle overseas corruption.

Let me begin by saying something about the Tanzania contract, which is mentioned first in the motion and which we believe to be a relatively clear-cut issue. In 2001, the British Government were asked to consider applications for export licences for the sale to the Tanzanian Government of a military-level air traffic control system. The system cost some £28 million, and the heavily indebted Tanzanian Government took on more debt to secure it. The International Monetary Fund told the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, that it was very concerned about the impact of the purchase on Tanzania's external debt burden. Despite the opposition of all the most informed, respected and qualified observers, approval for the licences was forced through what I understand to have been a divided Cabinet by the Prime Minister. Last year the Serious Fraud Office and the Ministry of Defence began investigating the deal for alleged corruption. It appears that we are talking about £12 million of commissions, some 29 per cent. of the contract value being in commissions.

The Conservative party remains very concerned that the Tanzanian contract has damaged this country's reputation for fighting corruption. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell) called a debate on the issue as long ago as 30 January this year. I thank the Minister for taking the opportunity to tell the House today what point the investigations have reached, although I am not entirely sure from what she said that they have moved much further forward.

Corruption and bribery legislation in the United Kingdom has of course been under scrutiny for some time. Existing English law is based on the common-law offence of bribery and a range of add-on statutory offences. The scope of United Kingdom bribery offences was extended to bribes offered outside the United Kingdom by part 12 of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001. However, as it seems to apply only to United Kingdom companies and not to foreign subsidiaries of such companies, its worth is limited.

Proposals for reform were made as a result of the Law Commission's 1998 report, and in December 2005 the Government started a consultation on the reform of corruption laws. In March this year, however, the Home Office announced that no consensus had emerged from the consultation, and that the Law Commission would be asked to undertake a further review. In parallel with the Government's efforts and in order to facilitate discussion of the need for comprehensive legislation, an alternative proposal was introduced as a Private Member's Bill in the House of Lords in November last year. At this stage it is unlikely to translate into legislation. Nine years down the road and despite all the usual new Labour anti-corruption spin and promises, we are not even close to new anti-corruption legislation. Has that become a priority now that a new new Labour regime is in place? The Solicitor-General addressed that issue in her earlier remarks, but will she commit to such reform being a priority?

The Solicitor-General: I have already said that we have asked the Law Commission to prioritise that. We have given it extra resources and when we receive its consultation document, which we hope and expect will be accompanied by a draft Bill, we will give it all priority. I should add that it is not for want of trying that the Government have not managed to change this law. Proposals were scrutinised in depth, including by Conservative Members in the Joint Committee on the draft corruption Bill, and they were sent back. I hope that our efforts have made the law—when it comes—better than before.

Mr. Djanogly: I thank the Solicitor-General for the confirmation that that is a priority.

On the al-Yamamah contract, the 1985 deal took three years to complete and involved the sale of fighters and trainer jets, the construction of two airbases and a range of other equipment and training, provided by more than 3,000 British experts stationed in Saudi Arabia. The contract is reported to have been worth some £40 billion to the UK over the last two decades, and it has secured our country's position as one of the world's top defence experts. The contract was renewed in 1992, after the Saudis agreed to buy another 48 Tornado fighters, and in 2005, in the deal's third stage, the British agreed to sell up to 72 Typhoon planes.

The Serious Fraud Office launched an inquiry into allegations surrounding the al-Yamamah contract. SFO officers seized documents and arrested and

interviewed some BAE Systems officials. The SFO discovered details of commissions being paid via Swiss bank accounts, although BAE and the Saudis have always denied any wrongdoing. The Saudi Government have also expressed anger at investigations into members of the Saudi royal family.

In December 2006, the then Attorney-General, Lord Goldsmith, stated that the SFO would discontinue its investigation. The SFO maintains that it was its own decision to pull out of the inquiry prompted by concerns over potential damage to national security, as opposed to its being forced to do so by the then Attorney-General. Lord Goldsmith stated that all relevant agencies were clear about the importance of UK-Saudi relations in the fight against terrorism. He said that if that co-operation were lost, there would potentially be damage to UK national security.

Some have argued that the SFO was told to stop the investigation because another multi-million pound deal with the Saudis might be lost. That is particularly relevant as it would constitute a breach of article 5 of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention on combating bribery of foreign public officials in international business transactions. Its key words are:

"Investigation and prosecution of the bribery of a foreign public official...shall not be influenced by considerations of national economic interest".

However, the then Attorney-General and the director of the SFO—and the Solicitor-General again today—have claimed that the decision was not based on commercial interest, and the then Attorney-General made it clear in the other place on 1 February that he did

"not believe that the convention does, or was ever intended to, prevent national authorities from taking decisions on the basis of such fundamental considerations of national and international security."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 1 February 2007; Vol. 689, c. 378.]

We do not dispute that interpretation of the convention, but the Liberal Democrats must say whether they do, and cut through some of the confusion they have caused.

There is, however, a further question: to what extent were there fundamental security issues? On 16 January, a report in *The Guardian* suggested that Sir John Scarlett, head of MI6, will not endorse the idea of British national security being at risk as a result of the probe, and that MI5 had no evidence that Saudi Arabia would sever its security links with the UK. However, following the report, the Foreign Office stated:

"Contrary to the Guardian article, SIS (MI6) shared the concerns of others within the government over the possible consequences for the public interest of the SFO investigation."

On 18 January, Lord Goldsmith stated that all relevant agencies were clear about the importance of UK-Saudi relations in the fight against terrorism and that if that co-operation were lost, there would potentially be damage to UK national security. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) spells out the deliberations of the Attorney-General and the head of the SFO, but we understand that ultimately the SFO maintains that it decided to pull out of the probe and that it was not forced to do so by the then Attorney-General—although the Attorney-General has the technical power to do that. I note that the Solicitor-General has today given further details of the national security implications, which was helpful. The Attorney-General had another reason to end the probe. He said in the other place that he was

"sceptical about the evidential basis".

He also said that after clearing his diary and spending some three days reviewing the evidence in detail with SFO investigators, and then taking leading counsel's advice, he

"formed the conclusion that, ultimately, this case was not going to succeed".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 1 February 2007; Vol. 689, c. 380.]

We ultimately accept that position, and would not want to spend yet more millions of taxpayers' money on a trial doomed to failure from the start.

The Government also spoke about the problem of getting evidence from Saudi Arabia in a scenario in which no one from BAE Systems or Saudi has said that they had done anything wrong.

David Howarth: The point that the hon. Gentleman has not taken into account is that the director of the SFO disagreed with the Attorney-General's assessment of the likelihood of success in an eventual prosecution. It is not just a political point; it is an important point about what the law said at the time and what evidence there was.

Mr. Djanogly: The hon. Gentleman is right, as the Solicitor-General said that he was. I do not think there is any dispute that there was a difference of opinion between the SFO and the Law Officers, but it seems that there was a progressive discussion, which eventually came to a conclusion.

Mr. Borrow: My understanding is that Mr. Wardle believed that there was a possibility of a prosecution if the investigation continued, not that he had the evidence to justify a prosecution, nor that he believed that there would be a prosecution. It was the Attorney-General's view that there was not and would not be enough evidence for a prosecution.

Mr. Djanogly: That is right. The Attorney-General came to the House of Lords and said that there were two planks to the decision. On one, he had a difference of opinion with the SFO. That has come out, and more details have been provided today, for which we should be grateful.

The Liberal Democrats' motion states that

"serious damage has been done to the reputation of British business".

The issue is complicated by the fact that it is not just a case of a private company contracting with the Saudi Arabian Government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said:

"It is a relationship package at a Government-to-Government level rather than an ordinary commercial agreement."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 881.]

Furthermore, it is plain that the cultural view of bribery—or shall we call it greasing the wheels?—has changed dramatically in the UK since al-Yamamah was first signed more than 20 years ago. That cultural change was represented by the 1997 OECD convention. We could spend much time looking at the

[Mr. Djanogly]

nature of agency payments, but as over-generous and distasteful as those payments and the related corporate entertainment may have been, and as many good headlines as were created for the tabloid press as a result, there seems to be inadequate evidence, after much investigation, to prove that a crime was committed.

On 7 February, my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield, the shadow Attorney-General, concluded that there was no evidential basis for the Attorney-General having been involved in any wrongdoing in relation to the closure of the investigation. I see no reason to change our position now, but if any additional and significant information is available, it should be handed over to the relevant authorities for consideration.

The Liberal Democrats' motion refers—their Front-Bench spokesman did not—to

"the consequences for the role of the Attorney General".

However politically convenient it may be for them to attribute blame to the Attorney-General, we believe that there is insufficient evidence to sustain such an assertion.

Moreover, the Lib Dems seem to be missing the real issue, which is that what constituted the public interest was and is cultivated not by the Attorney-General, but by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Cabinet, all of whom have been remarkably quiet on the issue. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) said:

"If the ultimate reason for the decision was national security, it would be for neither the SFO nor the Attorney-General but the Prime Minister to express a view on the matter. It would be the Attorney-General, reflecting the view of the Prime Minister, who would then have discussions with the SFO."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 886.]

The Solicitor-General today set out some more detail from the Prime Minister's memorandum, for which we were grateful. However, I note that it has been released now rather than at an earlier stage. I feel that the Government could have been more transparent in that regard.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): When Robert Wardle was asked who took the decision and was told that the Prime Minister had asserted that he had, apparently he replied that it was his view that he had taken it.

Mr. Djanogly: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification. Do the Lib Dems not realise how convenient it must be in practical terms for the current Labour Cabinet to let the ex-Attorney-General be the primary target for their criticism? Do the Lib Dems believe, in constitutional terms, that removing the Attorney-General and Solicitor-General from Parliament would mean that their accountability to Parliament would improve? I would say that it would not. As they would not be able to speak in Parliament, the Law Officers could even more easily be used as a scapegoat by the Cabinet if things were to go wrong.

The Solicitor-General: I am quite puzzled about how the hon. Gentleman has managed to conjure up a situation in which the Cabinet is blaming the last Attorney-General, when I spent a long time this afternoon justifying and setting out in great detail why he did his duty properly and with integrity. No one is blaming him at all; he was right.

Mr. Djanogly: I certainly did not say—let me make this clear—that the Cabinet, or anybody else, is blaming the last Attorney-General. I am saying that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet could have been rather more transparent and open in their views of what constituted national security interests. They seemed happy to leave it to the Attorney-General to make that case for them when it is arguable that they should have had more of an input themselves.

The Solicitor-General: It is quite difficult to win in this case. The hon. Gentleman has complained already that the Prime Minister was ready to say that he took full responsibility, making it plain that he had had substantial input, and yet the hon. Gentleman complains that somehow that Prime Minister left the Attorney-General to carry the can when he should have intervened. The hon. Gentleman needs to be realistic about the allocation of appropriate roles. The Prime Minister made the position clear, the Attorney-General passed the view on, with his advice attached, and Mr. Wardle made the decision—it is very clear.

Mr. Djanogly: We can disagree on that point.

The Conservative party believes that on the basis of the then Attorney-General's comments about the highly speculative nature of the inquiry and any final prosecution being unlikely, the decision to discontinue the investigation in view of the potential damage to our national security was inevitable and the only sensible course of action. However, it is important that lessons be learned from those events. The great failing of the motion is that it looks back rather than forwards. It does not even mention the need to improve the legislative framework to deal with corruption, although the hon. Member for Twickenham touched on that aspect in his remarks.

There is clearly a need for the Government to provide greater guidance on the operation of the 2001 Act and its impact on payments to individuals abroad, in addition to the Minister's support for earlier and better transparency on the mechanisms of Government decisions. That was certainly a welcome development, and we look forward to receiving further details on it. As for BAE, we welcome its decision to appoint Lord Woolf to carry out a review of its ethical standards and I note that the Minister provided the House with an update on the other SFO investigations into corrupt practices of UK businesses overseas.

Although we are unable to give our support to the Lib Dem motion, we hope that today's debate will reinforce the need for the Government to produce legislation to deal with the issues that have been highlighted by the motion. It is unacceptable to us that such an important issue as corruption is being dealt with in the form of a private Member's Bill, not least because it trivialises our need to comply with our obligations under article 1 of the 1997 OECD convention on bribery. The Government

need to take responsibility for the issue and to move the agenda forward. I note and welcome the Minister's promise of a draft Bill and we hope that its delivery will involve less delay than in the past.

5.49 pm

Mr. David S. Borrow (South Ribble) (Lab): I begin by pointing out that BAE Systems is a major employer in my area; I chair the all-party aerospace group; I am a member of the Select Committee on Defence; and I am a member of the Quadripartite Committee, which is responsible for reviewing arms exports. I therefore come to the debate with a clear vested interest in defending the interests of my constituents. I ought also to put on the record the fact that in 1999, I attended the Paris air show with the help of BAE Systems. I mention that because *The Guardian* report this morning was slightly ambiguous.

My constituents and those of other Lancashire MPs would have preferred that the SFO inquiry had reached a conclusion. The inquiry went on for years before it was stopped, yet the controversy, the uncertainty and the damage to BAE Systems and the wider British defence industry continue. I would have been much happier if the SFO had come to a decision, either that there was no evidence to justify a prosecution—end of story, that is it—or that there was clear and good evidence and that a prosecution should go ahead. Now, however, we have the worst of both worlds, because there are people in the UK who are more than happy to keep stirring the story—the Liberal Democrats in the main, but also journalists from various newspapers and the broadcast media. They do not accept that the SFO inquiry was stopped legitimately, in accordance with the constitution and for the correct reasons; they want to keep the story and the controversy going.

What is clear and what people ought to recognise is the number of jobs in the defence industry in this country that will be put at risk if we continue to raise this issue and to stir the pot. The estimate that I have is that the current contract—which is not signed and sealed—with Saudi Arabia for 72 Typhoons is worth £6 billion in the first instance, and that if it is extended to support maintenance and servicing of the aircraft for 20 years, it could be worth £40 billion. The contract will support 16,000 jobs, mainly in BAE Systems in Lancashire, but also in Rolls-Royce in Derby and Bristol.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many of those thousands of people are not employed directly by BAE Systems, but work for smaller contractors and suppliers? All sorts of people throughout Lancashire depend on a healthy and vibrant BAE Systems getting the order.

Mr. Borrow: I agree wholeheartedly. It is not only people working for the supply chain and the big companies in Lancashire who are affected. Few constituencies in this country do not have defence companies with direct links with either BAE Systems or another company that could be damaged by the continuation of this campaign by the Liberal Democrats. I sometimes wonder whether the Liberal Democrats realise that they have defence companies in their own constituencies. Do they realise the consequences of the campaign that they are waging, or are they so busy listening to the metropolitan chattering classes that they have forgotten the jobs, families, mortgages and so on that will be at stake if they continue to stain the reputation of the defence industry in the UK?

David Howarth: Everyone in the House realises what economic interests are at stake. It is just that some of us think that the rule of law is more important, because on the rule of law depends the whole of the economy, not just parts of it.

Mr. Borrow: Here we come to the heart of the problem. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General explained in detail the constitutional process that the Government and the Law Officers went through with the SFO before a decision was made to stop the investigation into the deal with Saudi Arabia—a deal that started more than 20 years ago. But Liberal Democrat Members do not accept the basis of that decision, so they wave the rule of law and say that it is not being applied, even though Ministers have explained in great detail every stage of the process that led to a decision that was made in the national interest. I assume that they do not agree that the decision was in the national interest, either, and that they are prepared to put at risk UK security by continuing their campaign.

Mr. Hendrick: Has not our hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General convincingly made the case that the correct process was gone through and that the rule of law has been applied? What is in question is the Liberal Democrats' motives. Clearly, the rule of law has been applied and part of the assessment has been put to them. Why do they persist in stirring the pot, causing all this uncertainty and instability in our industries, when they know full well that many jobs are at stake?

Mr. Borrow: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. Over the weekend, thinking about the debate, I wondered what the Liberal Democrats would do if, by some fluke, after the next election they found themselves in government, with one of their number responsible for this matter. Would they open all the cupboards and filing cabinets and publish all the information on the complexities of the agreement that was made in 1985 with Saudi Arabia and subsequent agreements—agreements that were made Government to Government as well as with BAE Systems and that were largely confidential? Would they simply forget about all those understandings between Governments and simply print, publish and distribute every bit of information they had? They seem to be arguing that that should be done.

Lynne Featherstone (Hornsey and Wood Green) (LD): Why does the hon. Gentleman think that the OECD is coming to investigate the case?

Mr. Borrow: I understand that the OECD is not doing so.

The Solicitor-General: Even the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), understood and asserted that we were not dealing with

[The Solicitor-General]

an OECD inquiry into the case. Perhaps the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone) should listen.

Mr. Borrow: I have been around this place long enough and tangled with Liberal Democrats locally often enough to know that the truth and the Liberal Democrats are rarely in the same room.

I have spoken with a lot of my constituents who work for BAE Systems. They recognise that we have to follow procedures and, if something wrong has been done, they want people to be prosecuted. However, they also say to me, "David, this deal was done 20-odd years ago, when Mrs. Thatcher was Prime Minister in a Conservative Government. We have had a Labour Government for 10 years, and the law has been changed and tightened up. The allegations that have been made relate to a deal that was made in 1985. The payments were presumably made after that, with the knowledge of the Saudi Arabian Government, with the knowledge of our Government and with the knowledge of BAE Systems. Where is the bribe? Where is the criminal activity? What is legally wrong? If all that was known by the SFO, why did it not prosecute? What else is there that could suddenly make what was done a criminal activity?"

My constituents simply want some security. They want to be assured that the jobs that they have been doing, and doing well, for the past 20 years making military aircraft that have been sold to and flown in Saudi Arabia can continue with the next deal for the Typhoon. Many workers in Brough are waiting for a similar deal on the Hawk. Those workers do not want their jobs to be put at risk by people continuing to stir the pot and besmirch the good name of BAE Systems.

Mr. Evans: If companies and countries could sponsor motions, the motion before the House would certainly be sponsored by all BAE Systems's competitors outside the United Kingdom. The French, the Germans, the Spanish and of course the Americans would rub their hands if they saw the motion. The real winners would be our competitors, and the real losers would be our constituents and those who work for BAE Systems and its suppliers.

Mr. Borrow: Yes, and I cannot really see our opposite numbers in Congress, or in the French National Assembly, having this sort of debate, or their parliamentarians seeking to damage their own defence industries and put their own workers out of jobs.

The issue does not just affect BAE Systems; that is what causes me ever more concern. The continuation of the campaign is damaging the reputation not of one company, but of the whole defence industry in the UK. Most defence industry companies will not go on the public record and say so, but senior people in many leading defence companies in this country tell me privately that they are beginning to worry about the impact that such campaigns will have, if they continue, on their ability to get orders and keep work for their companies.

A number of Liberal Democrat Members have major defence companies in their constituencies. They are being carried along by the campaign and the applause of *The Guardian* and "Panorama", but they ought sometimes to scratch their heads and wonder whether they are forgetting that the bread and butter of politics is people being in jobs, being able to pay the mortgage, and feeling secure about the future.

Mr. Hendrick I have just heard the accusation made, from a sedentary position, that we are turning a blind eye to the issue, but no one has accused anybody of being guilty. The Liberal Democrats do not have the guts to make a clear allegation—not even in their motion. Let us be clear: there has not been a crime. Any payments made were made over the table, and not under it, as has been alleged by the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Borrow: The Liberal Democrats have done a lot of mud-slinging at BAE Systems and the Government this afternoon. None of it amounts to anything, but it does damage the reputation of a fine company. I do not think that the Liberal Democrats truly understand the damage that they are doing. They have not come up with a single allegation of criminal wrongdoing, but they insinuate that there has been wrongdoing all the time. Fundamentally, things come down to one key issue: they do not believe that the Serious Fraud Office inquiry should have been stopped. They think that it was wrong of the SFO to stop it, and they do not accept the information that my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General has given to the House. Liberal Democrat Members are nodding their heads; they just do not accept that information, but they have no evidence to justify not accepting it. They simply prefer to go along with certain people in the media and stir things up, hoping that they can continue to damage the Government, without realising that they are damaging the prospects for the continued employment of many of our constituents.

6.4 pm

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): In the final paragraph of his speech—but sadly not in the rest of it—the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) made some points with which I agree. I shall raise five issues that arise from the events that we are discussing. The first is the damage done to the Serious Fraud Office's, and the country's, reputation for pursuing corruption. That such damage was done was conceded by Mr. Wardle in his evidence to the Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs; he said that "of course" there had been damage. The question now is what we—a country that likes to think of itself as being at the forefront of the fight against corruption across the world—can do to restore our reputation.

Of course, the one thing that we should not do is refuse to co-operate with other countries that are attempting to investigate the events from their point of view. That is why the issue of investigation by the US Department of Justice is so important: it gives our country an opportunity to show that it is not being evasive, that it is not trying to avoid the truth coming out, and that it wishes, along with other institutions and countries, to pursue corruption.

My second point is about the position of the Attorney-General. The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly) asked why we mentioned that issue in our motion. There are two distinct points to be made, both of which have been referred to already, largely by

the Solicitor-General. One is about the Shawcross exercises, and the other is about the Attorney-General's lack of distance from particular decisions to prosecute. As the Solicitor-General said, in the Shawcross exercises, Ministers make their views about the public interest known to prosecutors via the Attorney-General. The problem that arose from the case that we are considering is that until very recently, it was unclear precisely what happened, precisely how many Shawcross exercises there were, and precisely how they were dealt with.

The first Shawcross exercise was in December 2005. The second, which has only recently come to light, was in September last year, and the third one took place at the turn of the year. Is that the right way for the Government to communicate their views on the public interest to prosecutors? That pr[illegible]s needs to be far more open. I welcome the fact tha[illegible]licitor-General said that the case might be the start[illegible]viding at least some openness to Parliament. I un[illegible]nd that she said that the underlying points about [illegible]nal security should be revealed to a committee of Pri[illegible]uncillors—people who could be trusted with the information from a national security point of view. That is a good place to start. The fact that a Shawcross exercise has taken place—but not necessarily all the information in it, which it might not be wise to put in the public domain—ought to be revealed to the House. It should be revealed that the Government have taken a policy decision to make a point to a prosecutor. That point needs to be discussable, at least in general terms, on the Floor of the House.

I want to discuss the Attorney-General's distance from individual prosecutions and, perhaps more importantly, the confusion about what the Attorney-General's precise role is. The statutory language states that the Attorney-General has "superintendence" over the Director of Public Prosecutions, the director of the Serious Fraud Office and the equivalent in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, but what does the word mean? How does the relationship really work? The case that we are discussing illustrates the problem. Here I refer to the Government's response on the judicial review proceedings between the Serious Fraud Office on the one hand, and Corner House Research and Campaign Against Arms Trade on the other. It reveals that in the first Shawcross exercise in December 2005, "The Attorney-General decided" that the investigation should continue. He did so quite properly, because the argument that had been put to him by the Prime Minister was entirely improper. It was an argument based on commercial considerations, which are ruled out by the OECD treaty.

The Solicitor-General: There was nothing improper about the Prime Minister putting forward his concerns about commercial considerations. What would have been improper would have been for the Attorney-General, in breach of the convention, to take that on. Obviously, the Prime Minister puts forward concerns to Ministers about a range of matters. He is not constrained, as the Attorney-General is, by the OECD treaty, because the decision is taken elsewhere.

David Howarth: That raises an interesting point about the degree to which the Prime Minister is bound by international law, which has all sorts of interesting consequences that I will not go into today but that are important. Nevertheless, the point that I was trying to make was: who made the decision? The decision in December 2005 to continue with the investigations was made by the Attorney-General, and it was the right decision.

With regard to the September Shawcross exercise, again information comes from Ministers to the Attorney-General, and again the document says that the Attorney-General made the decision. At that point the issue was national security. At that point what was being put to the Attorney-General was that the relationship between this country and Saudi Arabia might be prejudiced and that therefore there might be a national security consequence. At that point, again, the Attorney-General took the decision that the investigation should continue.

In the final exercise, in December 2006, we are told—there is no reason to disbelieve this—that the director of the SFO, not the Attorney-General, took the decision. Mr. Wardle looks at the papers that have come to him from the Prime Minister's office, from Sir Richard Mottram, and takes the initiative to talk to our ambassador in Saudi Arabia, and at that point, the director decides to call off the prosecution for reasons of national security.

The Attorney-General does not take that decision; he has a different opinion about the case. His opinion is that not only is national security an important issue, but that the prosecution will not succeed, because he has a different interpretation of the law. Why is it the Attorney-General twice took the decision and the director once? What makes a difference in these decisions? This comes back to the vagueness of the idea of superintendence. That term cannot be the basis in the future of the relationship between the Attorney-General and the director of the DPP. We need far more clarity.

The Solicitor-General: I too think that the term "superintendence" is vague, but I suspect that the Shawcross exercise was carried out in 2005, it displayed that the only concerns were commercial interest, and therefore the Attorney-General had no advice to offer to the director of the SFO. In that sense, he did decide that nothing should interrupt the prosecution or investigation. Again, clearly, the issues raised about national security cannot have been so compelling that they required the Attorney-General, in his view, to give advice to the SFO on the second occasion either. Therefore, rightly, as the hon. Gentleman says, he decided that the prosecution should go on, but in both cases I think that what he decided was not to give any advice to the director of the SFO. But on the third occasion, he took the decision to do that, and it is at that point that the decision has to be made by the director of the SFO. That is probably what happened, and that is probably nothing other than a very sensible position, and the right one, bearing in mind the nature of the Shawcross exercise, and that that advice is or is not transmitted to the decision maker.

David Howarth: That is a possible interpretation of what happened. It raises the question of what precisely changed the Attorney-General's mind, which was the question I sought to ask early. We still do not know what happened there. It comes back to the point, with

[David Howarth]

which I am glad the Solicitor-General agrees, that "superintendence" is too vague a term to describe this relationship. We need far more specificity about how the prosecution authorities and the Attorney-General relate to one another.

My third point has been raised on a number of occasions already, and it is the definition of corruption. When hon. Members say no crime has been committed, or there is no proof of any crime, they do not quite understand that the problem here is a legal one, not a factual one. I think that everybody knows what happened—that money moved from the Saudi Government to Saudi officials via somebody else. The question is whether that was a crime. The Attorney-General and the director disagreed about whether that was a crime under existing British law. It is an interesting question, and one that should have been tested in the courts, rather than have been decided abruptly in the way that the Attorney-General might have decided had he been taking the decision, although we are told that he did not.

But there is a further question on this point. If one reads the OECD treaty and the Corruption Bill, which has passed through all its stages in the other place, there is not much doubt that the events that everyone knows took place are criminal. The question that I want to ask the Government is simply this. The Solicitor-General now says that she is waiting for the Law Commission to report and that she looks forward to a Bill being brought forward, but is it her view, not that that sequence of events is criminal, but that it should be criminal?

Mr. Borrow: The hon. Gentleman has just said that the sequence of events is criminal. Does he mean that the sequence of events would be criminal if the law were amended on the basis of the Lords Bill, or that it is criminal on the basis of the law that obtained at the time that the actions took place?

David Howarth: That raises profound questions that are before the courts about the status of international law in English law. If one follows the definition in the treaty, one would conclude that the actions were unlawful. If one follows the definition in the draft Bill, which is not yet law, one would conclude that the actions were unlawful. As to whether the actions were unlawful at the time depends on how one interprets existing law, and on that there was a profound difference of opinion between the Attorney-General on the one side and the director of the SFO on the other. Ultimately, that is a question that should be decided in the courts, not on the Floor of the House of Commons.

The fourth issue is the Government's attitude towards international law. One of the most disturbing things to come out of the Government's statement of their case in the judicial review is that they are now saying to the court in that case that even if the treaty were to mean that the case should not have been stopped for reasons of national security in those particular circumstances, the Government would still have gone ahead and stopped the prosecution, even in violation of international law. That is an extraordinary position for the Government to take. It might well be that they are forced into that position by tactical considerations in the litigation, but nevertheless that is the position that they have adopted. It is not a position that the Government of a civilised state should ever adopt.

Mr. Hendrick: Who has said that, and where has the hon. Gentleman got that information from?

David Howarth: The statement comes from the Government's summary grounds of resistance on behalf of the defendant in their judicial review case where Corner House Research and the Campaign Against Arms Trade are bringing proceedings against the director of the SFO and BAE Systems. If the hon. Gentleman wants to know the names of the lawyers, I will send him the entire document.

Mr. Hendrick: Who said that? I do not want the documents: I want to know who said it on behalf of the Government.

David Howarth: I shall send the hon. Gentleman the documents and he can work it out for himself. *[Interruption.]* I do not think that it is right to read out the names of the Government's lawyers on the Floor of the House, although I shall if he carries on asking that question.

Let me just move on to my final point. *[Interruption.]* I do know. Okay, I shall now read out the names of the Government's lawyers. They are Philip Sales QC, Hugo Keith and Karen Steyn, and obviously the instructing solicitor was the Treasury solicitor.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Howarth: No, I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He never makes any sense, and he does not allow the debate to continue on any rational grounds.

Let me move on to my final point, which is not a legal point, but a point about the decision that had to be taken. I disagree with those of my colleagues who think that the decision was easy. It was very difficult, but nevertheless, the wrong decision was made. The question is: what should a country do if there is a threat to its national security from the very people who are being investigated for illegality? I do not deny, as some people might, that the threat was real; the question is what does one do if that is the situation that one perceives.

The Government gave way to the threat, but the other argument is that doing so helps the fight against neither terrorism nor corruption. If that is what happened in this case, it sends out a very dangerous signal. In the long run, there is a greater threat to national security in giving way to such a threat than in resisting it.

Interestingly, Mr. Wardle told the Constitutional Affairs Committee that from the documents that the director was shown, Sir Richard Mottram did not take that risk into account. Again, it can be seen in Mr. Wardle's evidence to the Committee that it was assumed that none of this would ever come out, and

that the whole thing could be swept under the carpet. If that is true, the Government have added incompetence to their weakness of will.

The Solicitor-General: I am not entirely sure that I follow the hon. Gentleman, but I think that he is suggesting that we should ignore the possibility of a serious threat to public safety in this country and in the middle east because it comes from the quarter being investigated; and that even though we understand the centrality of Saudi Arabia in our counter-terrorist intelligence activities, we should make some bold swashbuckling stand against them like Braveheart, notwithstanding what such action might do to people in this city and throughout the UK.

David Howarth: There are two points: first, what was done was wrong; secondly, it was a mistake. It was wrong because it is wrong to give in to such blackmail. It was a mistake because in the long term, giving into such pressure is a greater threat to national security.

Mr. Borrow: I am just trying to probe the issue. On the basis of the information that the hon. Gentleman has, he has come to a view that Mr. Wardle's decision to halt the inquiry was wrong. However, the hon. Gentleman does not have access to all the information that Mr. Wardle had when he reached that decision, because the hon. Gentleman has not had those meetings with the ambassador to Saudi Arabia that were so crucial to Mr. Wardle reaching that decision. Is the hon. Gentleman absolutely confident that whatever the circumstances and whatever additional information might be available, he would still come to the same view that he holds now?

David Howarth: Since I said some minutes ago that one of the big problems with this issue is the lack of openness and scrutiny of the evidence, of course I cannot be absolutely confident. However, even accepting the uncertainties, there is a case for saying that the wrong decision was made.

Finally, if one looks at the events in the round, there is an implausibility about them, to use the word that the Solicitor-General picked up on. The implausibility is this: would a country that is our ally in the fight against terrorism take the actions that are currently being attributed to it and threaten the withdrawal of co-operation in the fight against terrorism, because of financial embarrassment? It might be true that they were persuaded that there would not be any effect on their reputation, because it was thought—perhaps on the Government's assurance—that none of this would come out. The other, more disturbing possibility, however, is that the Saudis are perhaps not the principal villains of this piece, and that the Government's main concern is not to conceal wrongdoing by foreign Governments or officials, but to conceal their own incompetence and wrongdoing in this country.

6.26 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): I shall vote for the motion tonight and I voted for a similar motion in February. Almost all the points that I wanted to make have been made by the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and for Cambridge (David Howarth), and the latter made some points, particularly his legal points, I had not thought of. I shall therefore make one specific point and then draw some general conclusions.

In this case, the investigation was brought to an end as a consequence of information provided in a memo, as we have heard again today, prepared by Richard Mottram for the Serious Fraud Office, and as a consequence of a series of oral briefings by the UK ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Robert Wardle provided the Constitutional Affairs Committee, on which I serve, with details of that information when he appeared before it. In this House, none of us, except the Solicitor-General, is in any position to judge whether the correct decision was taken on the basis of that information. We have not seen the memorandum, and we have not heard what the ambassador said. However, the Intelligence and Security Committee can see the material, and it can also summon witnesses, including the ambassador. That is why I strongly support the view that that Committee should consider the matter, and why I suggested that it investigate and report back to Parliament. That is what it exists to do.

I encouraged the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), the Chairman of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, to write to the Intelligence and Security Committee, on which he also serves as a member, asking it to initiate that investigation. We have not yet had a reply. On the basis of such an investigation, we might receive some reassurance about whether the decision was taken on a reasonable interpretation of the evidence. I welcome the Solicitor-General's remarks about the need to strengthen parliamentary scrutiny of the security services and the information that they provide.

I have the same intuitive doubts about the security arguments as the hon. Member for Cambridge. It strikes me as implausible—to use a word that, although widely ridiculed in the House, is a perfectly reasonable expression of something short of certainty—that the Saudi Arabians would want to cut off their noses to spite their faces. They must realise that if they were to cut off co-operation with us, we might be less keen to supply them with information collected here, which is valuable to them in dealing with al-Qaeda domestically.

Incidentally, I am disappointed that the Quadripartite Committee, which was specifically set up to consider such issues in the light of legislation put on the statute book five or six years ago, has failed to announce that it will take a look at the issue—I hope that someone is listening to that remark.

My remaining quick remarks relate to a number of suggestions made by the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow). He has strongly implied that the decision not to go ahead with the investigation is justifiable on commercial grounds. The right hon. Member for Warley (Mr. Spellar) made that point in February, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) has made a similar point. Those hon. Members have repeatedly sought to justify the decision not to take the matter any further on the grounds that jobs—in particular, jobs in their constituencies—are at stake. I understand that hon. Members who have constituencies where jobs are at

[Mr. Andrew Tyrie]

risk want to make those points, but that does not constitute an argument for not investigating the matter further.

Mr. Borrow: My argument is not that the investigation should be halted because of the number of jobs at stake; it is that because the investigation has been stopped on proper and appropriate legal grounds, those who object to and disagree with the decision are putting employment in the defence industry at risk by continuing to challenge the decision and publicise their opposition to it.

Mr. Tyrie: In saying that, the hon. Gentleman is also lining up for criticism the director of the SFO, who has made it clear that he is disappointed that the investigation is not proceeding. In any case, a number of other hon. Members have made the point to which I have alluded and which the hon. Gentleman has qualified—it is all available in *Hansard*.

Mr. Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: In view of the number of interventions that the hon. Gentleman has made that added nothing, I am reluctant to give way, but on this occasion I will do so.

Mr. Hendrick: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his extreme generosity. A number of hon. Members were concerned about the impact on jobs, but that was only a collateral issue. The key issue is clearly national security. The longer that Liberal Democrat Members and people such as the hon. Gentleman pursue this media campaign, the more damage will be caused not only to jobs, but, if the Liberal Democrats and the hon. Gentleman have their way, national security.

Mr. Tyrie: It is important that we weigh in the balance the arguments on national security by asking the Intelligence and Security Committee to consider them and to report to Parliament, and I hope that it will do so.

The hon. Gentleman described the jobs argument as "a collateral issue", but either there are or there are not commercial considerations that should be taken into account. If it was right to take those considerations into account—I do not agree that this is the right approach—I have not seen a thorough assessment of the value for money of that huge deal. I do not know the extent to which the British taxpayer has subsidised the deal, and I do not think that anyone present in the Chamber knows, either.

Nor am I aware of any estimate of the commercial cost of the risk that is sitting on the Export Credits Guarantee Department's books as a consequence of the deal—if anyone has seen an estimate, I would be interested to hear about it. The ECGD's accounts are still, after many years of pressure for reform, opaque. In my view, when a default comes through on the ECGD, it should score not against the public sector financial deficit, but as public expenditure against the budget of a particular Department. That would allow us to compare the value of that credit guarantee against other forms of public expenditure in which that Department is engaged. We need much more transparency in the work of the ECGD, because deep in the recesses of how the arms industry is conducted lies a worrying lack of transparency.

Lynne Featherstone: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not do so on this occasion, because, first, I am about to conclude and, secondly, the winding-up speeches are about to begin.

I want to finish the point about jobs. I have mentioned the ECGD and the fact that we do not know what other subsidies financed the deal. One thing that we learned in the 1970s is that propping up jobs by Government subsidy—throwing public money at them—is always a counter-productive waste of money in the long run, which is why such subsidies were largely wound up in the 1980s. The arms industry has, to some degree, succeeded in exempting itself from the full pressures of the commercial marketplace, which concerns me.

Finally, has this issue now been put to bed? I think not, for two reasons. First, it is likely that the US authorities will pursue the matter and that the damage to BAE Systems will persist, which will in turn continue to harm Britain's reputation. Secondly—this point has not been raised in today's debate—the security considerations that led to the decision may change. Are we sure that the Saudi regime will always maintain its threat to close down security co-operation if the investigation is reopened? If and when there is a shift in the Saudi position on the deal, which has many years to run, the SFO is at liberty to reopen the investigation. Indeed, in response to a question from me on exactly that, Robert Wardle said in the Committee that his office will keep under review the assessment of the national security risk.

The issue has not finally gone away, and it has not finally been put to bed. It is a matter for debate whether we are in a better position than we would have been had the investigation been allowed to continue. What have we really gained by terminating the investigation? Well, we have gained some time. Are we more secure as a result? It has been asserted that we are, but I would like the Intelligence and Security Committee's reassurance on that point. Are economic benefits being secured? I would be very surprised if the balance of benefits and costs of the deal as a whole is clear-cut, but, again, I do not have the information—the fact that the PAC report has not been published makes such a judgment more difficult. There is also the question of damage to reputation, where nothing has been gained and almost certainly quite a lot of damage has been done. Overall, did the Government make a mistake? It is difficult to tell, but I will not form my judgment until an Intelligence and Security Committee investigation has taken place and we have debated it.

6.38 pm

Mr. Michael Moore (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), who made many points that I might otherwise have raised. A relatively

short period of the debate remains, and I will make sure that the Minister gets plenty of time to cover the main issues and some of the points that the Solicitor-General did not address earlier.

I want to pick up some of the contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (David Howarth) set out a forensic examination of the Attorney-General's role. I am disappointed that, unlike the hon. Member for Chichester, Conservative Front Benchers and others will not support us in the Lobby in a few moments' time. However, we welcome the fact that the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Djanogly), set out his party's concern about many of the issues and the fact that procedures need to be tightened. He was also right to spend a bit of time on the issues arising out of the deal with Tanzania—a matter that my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has pursued doggedly for a number of years and is still asking questions about.

As well as the speech by the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow), there have been several interventions in which Members have understandably, and rightly, considered the economic aspects of this and the jobs that they believe may be at stake. The hon. Member for Chichester set out some of the genuine concerns that we as parliamentarians must raise about the use of public money for some of these contracts. It is unfortunate if those of us asking questions are to be tarred as being somehow against jobs, because that is far from the truth. However, I do not dispute the right of the hon. Member for South Ribble and others to make the case for their constituents.

Lynne Featherstone: Given the very limited number of players in the field capable of supplying massive arms contracts, does my hon. Friend agree that if there were a strong international will in all countries, from Governments down to suppliers, to cut out corruption, the business would still be there but costs to businesses would be cut because corruption would be cut?

Mr. Moore: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the importance of international agreements and arrangements—a matter that has been discussed in the course of this debate and that we must keep scrutinising in this House and elsewhere.

We have not questioned the integrity of officials or of right hon. and hon. Members. We have asked questions, legitimately, about the roles that certain individuals have played, but we have not questioned their integrity. However, we do question the integrity of the processes by which we in this place are able to scrutinise the Government, and therefore make no apology for the fact that we have returned to this subject less than six months after we last introduced a debate on it. The issues are of such magnitude, and Parliament's need to scrutinise them is so serious, that we are happy to have provided another rare opportunity for debating them.

Several issues have been raised in the past couple of hours. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who set out our case at the start of the debate, advanced the arguments relating to al-Yamamah in detail, so I will not repeat them in the brief time available to me. On the other investigations, I am grateful to the Solicitor-General for setting out a summary of where she understands them to be going. She has dismissed all our inquiries as mere innuendo, in which respect she follows her predecessor, who used a similar tactic in the previous debate. For the purposes of this debate, let us accept that on the Government Benches attack is the best form of defence.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): Does my hon. Friend recognise a wider point concerning the Government's astonishing arrogance in not acknowledging the real shame that this has brought on the country? To give one example from the foreign press, *The Hindu* said, on 11 June:

"What is more shameful, is that it is being defended by a government that is supposed to be spearheading a campaign against corruption in developing countries and never tires of lecturing African and Asian leaders."

Is it not true that damage is being done and that the message is, "One rule for the rich nations and one for the poor"?

Mr. Moore: My hon. Friend raises an important issue about Britain's reputation on the world stage—one that the Foreign Affairs Committee highlighted in its recent report on human rights, which concluded:

"the Government's decision to halt the inquiry into the al Yamamah arms deal may have caused severe damage to the reputation of the United Kingdom in the fight against corruption."

In their response to the report, the Government asserted that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development working group "welcomed the UK's openness" in their meetings with the group. Well, yes, it would. However, their response plays down the group's remaining concerns, and they have not fairly represented the seriousness of the views held by the OECD. Let us remember that following the March 2007 meeting at which the SFO inquiry was discussed with the UK representatives, the working group stated that it

"reaffirmed its serious concerns about the United Kingdom's discontinuation of the BAE Al Yamamah investigation and outlined the continued shortcomings in UK Anti-Bribery legislation. It urged the UK to remedy these shortcomings as quickly as possible and decided to conduct a further examination of the UK's efforts to fight bribery."

That is where we stand in the international dock. Our reputation as a country is surely at stake, as this investigation makes clear.

Perhaps more immediately, our relationships with key partners are also at stake. In this regard, we all understand the importance of our relationship with Saudi Arabia. Beyond the economic significance of our links in oil, industry and services, we have common interests in the safety of the region and the development of a middle east peace plan. Nobody can deny the significance of the ties in relation to security co-operation. In our February debate on this matter, the Minister for the Middle East, whom we are pleased to see still in his place, underlined that with appropriate conviction:

"Saudi Arabia has its own problems with al-Qaeda—there is no question about that—yet much of the money for al-Qaeda also comes from Saudi Arabia".

After giving an appropriate example of the links between Saudi dissidents and al-Qaeda, he said:

[Mr. Moore]

"We ignore that fact at our peril. It is extremely important to recognise that we need the co-operation of the Saudis in these matters. It must be a very important consideration."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 907.]

I agree with him wholeheartedly on that. He rightly went on to remind us that UK citizens have been the victims of terrorist attacks in the region and that British co-operation with the Saudis is therefore critical. However, just before that section of his speech, he pointed out the needs of the Saudis themselves:

"There is a high threat of terrorism in Saudi Arabia. Attacks have taken various forms. At their height in 2003 and 2004, they included kidnappings, large-scale truck bombings of residential compounds and Saudi Government offices, an attack on the US consulate in Jeddah, targeted shootings of individuals, small-scale car bombings, parcel bombings and the bombing of shopping areas."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 906.]

The pressures on the Saudis are enormous, and it seems self-evident that they need our co-operation at least as much as we need theirs.

That issue has not been properly explained, and I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to do so in a few moments. How formal were these warnings from the Saudis? Were not the Government outraged when, out of the blue, we were suddenly being told that important security co-operation that matters to both our countries was to be withdrawn merely on the basis of a particular SFO inquiry? Has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office used every available channel to protest about these crude tactics by an important partner? If it has, and it has been unsuccessful, what on earth does that now say about our relationship with the Saudis that those proceedings did not work? Separately, we can attack this by asking how credible those threats were, and what discussions there were at that time about the loss that the Saudis would suffer from breaking those links. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us what reappraisal has been forced on the UK on the strength of these experiences and what that now says about our broader relationship with the Saudis.

This issue has spilled over into the Atlantic. We now know that the Ministry of Justice is carrying out its own investigation. I welcome the fact that the Solicitor-General said earlier that the Home Office has received a formal request and that that co-operation is proceeding. What further discussions are taking place with the FCO or the Ministry of Defence on what part they are going to play in this?

The sale of arms will always be secretive, by its very nature, and it is necessarily so. Great issues of national security are at stake and the economic value of arms exports is crucial to us as a country. Equally, our relationships with partners to whom we sell aircraft, tanks or whatever, matter greatly. Of course, there are separate significant issues relating to national security bound up with those relationships. We cannot ignore any of that, but nor should we in Parliament ignore our responsibility to scrutinise such issues, and to ensure that Government policies are right and their implementation appropriate.

6.50 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr. Kim Howells): Despite the subject of the debate, which is very wide-ranging—"The investigation of alleged corruption overseas"—much of it has focused on the decision by the director of the Serious Fraud Office to drop the fraud investigation into BAE Systems. There is only so much I can add to that discussion, and my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General has dealt carefully and in great depth with the events that led the director to make his decision. As my hon. and learned Friend said at the start, that decision was made by the director alone, although—we have always been very open about this—representations were made to him about the need to safeguard national and international security.

It is difficult to imagine what alternative path he, and we, should have taken. The Government were given good reason to believe that there is a real and present danger to their security and intelligence co-operation with a country that plays a vital role in helping us to ensure the safety of our citizens from threats posed, among others, by al-Qaeda terrorism. I have been working with our middle eastern partners for long enough to assure the House that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a key partner in tackling al-Qaeda threats to the lives of British nationals and other civilians at home and abroad.

It would have been wholly irresponsible of us to have ignored that information. It would have been wholly wrong not to make the Serious Fraud Office aware of it, and it made a decision based on that evidence. It was not an easy decision, and I do not think that anyone here today claimed that it was. Of course it was not; the investigation was not begun with the intention of calling it off further down the line. However, on balance, it was the right decision, and we are confident that it was compatible with the OECD convention. It has been implied this afternoon that we have set a precedent by the decision of the director, Robert Wardle. We have not. Faced with the same set of circumstances and the same evidence of the implications for national and international security, we would make the same representations to the SFO. The idea that there is now a carte blanche for companies from this country to bribe at will is patently absurd, and I urge colleagues to think hard before throwing the sort of allegations around that imply otherwise—some of which we have heard today.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General has told us, the SFO is pursuing other investigations vigorously, including some, as she reminded us, into BAE Systems. We have made it quite clear that no company or individual is above the law. We expect high standards of business conduct, and compliance with the law of the United Kingdom and that of the countries in which they operate, from all UK defence companies. We expect those high standards to be observed in any future contract in respect of defence sales to Saudi Arabia. We would expect the high standards operated by British companies to be recognised and respected by Members of this House from all parties.

Companies such as BAE Systems are very much aware that their world-leading products and services need the benefits that a good reputation bring in international sales. They also know, and it is a sharp

reminder to all of us, that convictions for corruption in this country can mean a seven-year jail sentence and/or an unlimited fine. That should focus everybody's minds.

The Government are second to none in the transparency and rigour of their regulation of arms exports and dual-use goods. I remind the House that before manufacturers are allowed to export, they submit applications for export licences to the Department of Trade and Industry, as it was. Hon. Members will excuse me if I cannot remember what the new Department is called—*[Interruption.]* I believe it is DBERR—the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. The Department consults Whitehall—the Foreign Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence—to check whether an export is legal and consistent with the United Kingdom's obligations. We abide rigorously by the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. The earlier implication, therefore, that we are somehow not up to the mark internationally, is completely spurious.

Since the debate is—nominally at least—about the wider issues of corruption and bribery, it is worth reminding ourselves of the Government's record on the issues. The fact is that in the past 10 years, the world has moved on a great deal from a time when many powerful Governments and businesses turned a blind eye to practices such as bribery and kickbacks. There is now a global coalition of non-governmental organisations, consumers, Governments and companies helping to put the frameworks and mechanisms in place to stamp such practices out. The United Kingdom's role in that shift has been considerable, involving activities and alliances that are designed to root out corrupt behaviour.

We are pushing for the implementation of the United Nations convention against corruption. The provisions on improving international co-operation and on asset recovery are particularly important. We are implementing the third European Union directive on money-laundering to make it even harder to move criminal money, including looted assets, through our financial system. The Department for International Development has put £6 million into strengthening the UK's law enforcement capacity to investigate allegations of foreign bribery and the laundering of corrupt assets by political elites.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): One of the more constructive comments to come out of this debate was that of the Solicitor-General on the need to strengthen the law on bribery and corruption. Would the Minister give us more of an idea of the timetable for that legislation?

Dr. Howells: As my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General told us earlier, this is an important matter. She accepted some guilt for slowing the process because she wanted to be vigorous in the examination of proposed legislation. Like the hon. Gentleman, whose views I very much respect, I would like to see the process move more quickly than it has, and I hope that what we have heard during the debate helps to do that. I understand that the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee took a lot of time over the matter, and did not much like the shape of the proposed legislation. It has to take another look at it, but I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman; it is a priority, and it must go ahead quickly.

We have been working with Transparency International on funding elements of a major anti-corruption programme in south Asia, focusing on improving transparency in public procurement. Of course, it is this Government who have shown long-running leadership on the extracted industries transparency initiative. We were involved with the beginning of the Kimberley process to stamp out "conflict" or "blood" diamonds, and that has brought results. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is widely recognised as the international standard for the management of public revenues from oil, gas and mining.

Our support for the work of the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has helped it to become the most successful anti-corruption body in Africa, reporting more than 150 convictions and the recovery of $5 billion since 2002. There is also the Kenya textbook project, where we transferred funds to individual school bank accounts, so that money was more likely to go towards education and less likely to be siphoned off along the way.

I believe that probably no Government in the world have a better record than ours on fighting bribery and corruption world wide. It is damaging nonsense to claim that the Serious Fraud Office's decision to discontinue a single investigation because of our concern to safeguard national and international security has undermined all that work.

Transparency International's latest independent analysis says that the United Kingdom ranks as the least corrupt of the G7 countries. I am not sure whether that is damning with faint praise but it says something. We are not complacent about the challenges in the United Kingdom or abroad, and we will take them up with energy and determination.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made his usual statement at the beginning of the debate. He is, of course, a great master of dubious poetic phrases and he has a resilient mud-throwing arm. Today, he spoke about money, and we heard that the Government's money is not allocated, spent or exchanged but "swills around". He is a great expert at diving into the swill tub. He throws its contents at any convenient target, regardless of the impact of his efforts. This afternoon, he threw some at Sir Richard Mottram's reputation by implying that he is part of a conspiracy that dates back to the al-Yamamah arrangements. He did that despite the fact that Sir Richard is one of our most distinguished and respected public servants, who has played a crucial role in helping this country reconfigure and strengthen our defences against the real and present danger that terrorists within and beyond our shores pose to the United Kingdom.

I therefore hope that hon. Members will vote against the absurd Liberal motion and support the Government amendment.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 46, Noes 284.

Division No. 183] **[7.01 pm**

AYES

Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Durkan, Mark
Featherstone, Lynne
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Harvey, Nick
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Holmes, Paul
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, David
Hughes, Simon
Hunter, Mark
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Moore, Mr. Michael
Mulholland, Greg
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr. John
Robertson, Angus
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert
Teather, Sarah
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bob Russell and
Mr. Roger Williams

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benton, Mr. Joe
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Field, Mr. Mark
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Ilsley, Mr. Eric
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maliaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall, Mr. David
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCrea, Dr. William
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill

Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, David
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Sadiq Khan and
Mr. Dave Watts

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 266, Noes 45.

Division No. 184] **[7.16 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Anderson, Janet
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benton, Mr. Joe
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall, Mr. David
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris

Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Christine
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Sadiq Khan and
Mr. Dave Watts

NOES

Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Cooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Durkan, Mark
Featherstone, Lynne
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Harvey, Nick
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Holmes, Paul
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Hunter, Mark
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
McCrea, Dr. William
Moore, Mr. Michael
Mulholland, Greg
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr. John
Robertson, Angus
Rogerson, Dan
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Teather, Sarah
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Stephen
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Bob Russell and
Mr. Roger Williams

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House supports the Government's stance against international corruption; welcomes the action it is taking to tackle it; and recognises that the decision to discontinue the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) investigation into BAE Systems plc and Saudi Arabia was taken by the Director of the SFO alone for reasons of national and international security.

Fair Taxation of the Wealthy

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I must announce that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.31 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the growing gap in wealth and income inequality since 1997; calls for the publication of Office of National Statistics wealth inequality data since 2003; regrets that the complexities of the tax system allow wealthy individuals to utilise tax loopholes; notes with alarm the increasing number of wealthy individuals who are non-domiciled for tax purposes; recognises the increasing burden that this places on middle-income families who are disproportionately affected by, in particular, stamp duty and inheritance tax thresholds, given that these thresholds have not been recently re-assessed to reflect large increases in house prices; and proposes the tax system be amended to ensure that the wealthiest individuals pay their fair share.

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce a debate on this subject on behalf of my Liberal Democrat colleagues. I am also grateful to House of Commons staff who, after much deliberation, admitted the word "fair", which I believe was quite controversial.

There are usually two broad approaches to debates on taxation. One is the argument about the level of taxation in the economy. Indeed, arguments have raged backwards and forwards between the parties as to whether as a country we are over-taxed or under-taxed. This debate is not about that subject. As I understand it, although the Conservatives approach the problem from the opposite direction, they broadly accept the current share of taxation in the economy, at least as an initial starting point, and are arguing about whether tax should be applied in a more sensible and equitable way. We believe that within the current level of taxation it would be possible to have a system that is fairer, simpler and greener. I want to focus on the first of those—the concept of fairness, by which I mean paying greater attention to the distribution of income and wealth.

To introduce some precision to the concept of fairness, it would probably help at the outset to monitor some of the recent trends in income and wealth distribution. It is fairly clear that since the Government came to power in 1997, income distribution as measured by the standard Gini coefficient initially deteriorated. It was rather odd that the Government were talking about fairness and equality after a long period of Conservative Government, yet for a considerable time income inequality widened. Subsequently, it has levelled off and is now roughly back to where it was in 1997. I guess that one of the major contributory factors was tax credits. Although Members on these Benches and on the Opposition Benches generally have been very critical of the tax credit system because of its administrative failings, there is little doubt that many people have benefited from it and it has contributed to the stabilisation, at least, of the income inequality measure.

The distribution of wealth, however, has become significantly worse. If we track the share of marketable assets held by the top 1 per cent., 5 per cent. or 10 per cent. of the population, we find that their share increased from 1997 to 2003 while the share of the bottom 50 per cent. shrank. Unfortunately, we cannot track what happened since 2003 because the Government no longer publish the data. They say that there are "methodological problems" with that. It is a tricky thing to measure, so I will be generous and acknowledge that that could be the reason, but it could also be rather embarrassing and so they do not wish to publish such data. None the less, we do not have data beyond that date. Such as we have suggest that the distribution of wealth was deteriorating during the Government's first six years in office.

The context in which we can assess the trends in income and wealth is difficult because of broader global trends. However progressive any Government wish to be, it is difficult to maintain an approach to income and wealth equality of the kind that was possible in more closed economies. We now have virtual freedom of movement of capital, and capital migrates to areas with the highest rates of return—that is the way the market works. That is true also of many people with high levels of skill and entrepreneurial ability; they pursue the best returns. It is probably also true that, because of the large-scale entry of China and, to some extent, India to the world economy, real wages have come under pressure everywhere. It is difficult for any Government in any circumstances to maintain very close levels of equality in an open economy. I start out by recognising that.

For that reason, it is probably best to look at comparative measures of how other rich countries perform. I recently dug out some data on the distribution of wealth. There is not a great deal of it around and it is difficult to compile. One set produced by the Central Intelligence Agency—perhaps an original source—which was put together by the Economic and Social Research Council, shows that although Britain has a more equal distribution than the United States, it has a substantially less equal distribution of family wealth than almost every other developed country. It is much worse than Scandinavia, France, Germany and most eastern and southern European countries. The same relative conclusion is reached in a parallel study carried out by an organisation called WIDER—the World Institute for Development Economics Research—which I believe is linked to the United Nations university.

Although it is understandable that because of the mobility of capital and skilled labour and the pressure of labour competition through trade, equality of income and wealth are under pressure, Britain seems to have become a relatively unequal country. One can reasonably ask that the Government do not pursue policies that make those disparities worse. I would like to concentrate on several of those policies, related specifically to taxation as it applies to wealth. We do not have a wealth tax in this country—it is probably no longer a practical concept, though the Swedes and French have tried it—but we have proxy taxes for wealth. We have taxes on capital gains, and taxes on stamp duty and inheritance, so I want to consider how those systems work and particularly some of the exemptions for non-domiciled investors—one of the main concessional areas of tax policy. There are, of

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

course, much wider aspects of tax policy relating to income tax, tax credits and council tax, which colleagues and others might wish to refer to, but I will narrow my remarks to the areas that I have defined.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman explain how it would be fairer to impose a poll tax or rubbish tax on people on low incomes in addition to their local income tax, which he proposes? Why would it be fairer to charge small businesses extra business rates if there happens to be an improvement in their neighbourhood that they could not control and that does not benefit them? Under the hon. Gentleman's supplementary business rate proposals, that would mean a big leap in their business taxes.

Dr. Cable: I am not quite sure where the right hon. Gentleman has got the idea that we are proposing a poll tax on people on low incomes. He has wholly misunderstood that. The only taxation relating to individuals that we propose is the complete elimination of the council tax system and its replacement by local taxation based on ability to pay.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman should read section 4.0.12 of his document, "Reducing the Burden", which states that Liberal Democrats "support giving authorities" the "powers to introduce" rubbish taxes.

Dr. Cable: If the right hon. Gentleman read the document more carefully, he would discover that—if he is talking about the collection system, which has been controversial in the Communities and Local Government Committee—we are in favour of giving local authorities discretion. Surely the right hon. Gentleman, who I know is a highly economically literate man, would accept that where there are pollution and externalities, they have to be properly charged for. That applies to waste disposal as to other things.

The first of the major exemptions given by the Government is in relation to capital gains tax. In 1997, the system inherited from the noble Lord Lawson had the merit of simplicity, as capital gains were taxed at the same rate as income. The system worked reasonably well and was accepted by businesses as providing reasonable incentives. I recall—the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) is probably the only other Member present who was part of the discussions—that a radical change in the capital gains tax regime was introduced by the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson).

The key new concept was taper relief, whereby individuals and businesses should be granted relief depending on the length of time that they held on to their assets. That was severely criticised at the time, certainly by the Liberal Democrats, and, I believe, by the Conservatives too. The argument was advanced that the concession would prove to be very expensive, that businesses would find ways of collecting the relief without changing their behaviour, and that trying to use taxation in that way would eventually prove counter-productive. In retrospect, we know that businesses have taken enormous advantage of the taper relief rules in ways that are quite unconnected with the original intentions to encourage ventures and to encourage individuals to hold their assets for long periods, to reduce what was called the "churning" of investment.

The issue has surfaced in the context of so-called private equity companies. I shall not use this debate as an opportunity to speak for or against that form of corporate governance—there are arguments for and against it—as it is not the right context. Some of those companies, however, have availed themselves of generous tax relief, and have created the situation in which they hold on to assets as a result of carried interest for several years—two years if they are classified as a business—and pay as little as 10 per cent. in tax. That gave rise to the popular story about private equity companies paying tax at 10p in the pound, and their cleaners paying tax at 20p in the pound.

Criticism has come from outside the industry, some of which is well informed and some less so, but it is worth quoting one of the leading advocates of that method of corporate governance, Jon Moulton, of Alchemy Partners, who has been doing that kind of business for many years. He said in relation to his own business:

"in this country, the exchequer loses out. The chancellor should be thinking again about the tax revenue he loses"

as a result of leveraged buy-outs. He acknowledges the enormous cost to the Exchequer of the concession that his industry has been granted.

One could argue that that problem could be dealt with selectively. There was a memorandum of understanding under which that form of carried interest was allowed tax relief, and that could simply be closed and dealt with on a selective basis. That would probably be unfair to the private equity industry, however, as such companies are only one of several types of company taking advantage of such a generous loophole.

To give an example that has nothing to do with private equity, in *Property Week* a few weeks ago, the retiring chairman of British Land, Mr. Ritblat, described his experience:

"The reason why I sold the shares is terribly simple. The benefit of business asset taper relief when you are still the employee of a company is colossal, the difference of 10 per cent. tax to 40 per cent. Selling them now means I save £20 million in tax. Tell me one person who wouldn't want to save themselves £20 million?"

He was not claiming in any sense that he had contributed to entrepreneurial endeavour; he had simply found a way of managing his property portfolio in a way that saved himself enormous amounts of tax as a result of the Government's taper relief concession. We would argue that that tax relief has been grossly, excessively generous, with very little positive economic outcome. It is a strange form of tax, as the total tax yield to the Government—£4 billion—is considerably less than the Government's own estimate of the value of the relief, which is £6 billion. We would argue for going back to the much simpler system that the Government inherited in 1997.

The second group of tax measures that I want to discuss is those relating to non-domiciled investors.

The concept has been around for roughly two centuries—since income tax was introduced. From its inception, it was understood that it would be fair and an encouragement to the City of London, which was then in its embryonic form, for people to be taxed on their income in Britain but not on the income that they accrue overseas if they have good claims to be non-domiciled and not to have strong, traditional connections with this country. That developed in an ad hoc way, and was formalised first after the first world war, and secondly after the second world war.

It is clear that that system has caused some dissatisfaction, probably expressed most cogently and aggressively by the current Prime Minister when he was the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1994, he undertook to close the loophole under which

"those who are non-domiciled are able to live in the UK free of tax".

He did not lose sight of that concern: in the pre-Budget report of 2002, he returned to the subject. He argued that we need to revisit the question:

"It is generally accepted as fair that those with a long-term connection"

to a country

"owe a special obligation to support the social structures of the state."

He initiated an inquiry into the non-domicile tax regime in the following terms:

"the current rules determining residence and domicile have developed over the past 200 years, are complex and poorly understood, and do not reflect the reality of today's more integrated world".

He initiated an inquiry in the Treasury with a view to tightening up those rules.

The spirit of the age was also expressed by Mr. Peter Mandelson, as we can now call him, who described the new Government as "intensely relaxed" about people getting filthy rich, as long as they paid taxes. He was anxious that the Government should close down the loopholes.

The question arises: how do the loopholes operate, and do they operate entirely in accord with the spirit of non-domicile?

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): My hon. Friend mentions the comment about being relaxed about the wealthy getting even wealthier. Does he recall the then Prime Minister being interviewed on "Newsnight", being pressed repeatedly on whether it was a bad thing that the gap between the rich and poor was growing, and serially evading the question? Given that our debate is about fairness in the tax system, is my hon. Friend as relaxed as Mr. Mandelson about that gap, or does he think that there comes a point beyond which gross inequalities are damaging to society?

Dr. Cable: I am not relaxed about that matter, as it is a subject of legitimate concern. There are two issues: one is whether one is relaxed about inequality; the other, about which Mr. Mandelson was quite right, is that one can be more relaxed, providing that the very wealthy pay their share of tax. In many non-domicile cases, it seems that tax is not being paid that should have been paid, at least if the spirit of the system was being observed. Let me describe one or two different ways in which the system now operates so that capital gain that accrues in the UK does not carry taxation.

We need only consider the evidence given by tax advisers, who are often quite public and free with their advice. Mr. Andrew Tailby-Faulkes, a tax partner at Ernst and Young, described some of the mechanisms currently employed.

First,

"For... residents who remain foreign domiciles it is possible to set up dual contracts for work in the UK and overseas, again with the overseas portion not taxable unless remitted to the UK."

That is a common practice among people who are in the City for several years. Another tax adviser, Lee Hadnum, author of "Non Resident and Offshore Tax Planning", describes preferential tax treatment as

"a fantastic tax break because it means that your investments can grow (offshore) tax-free for many years and potentially indefinitely".

One of the technical aspects is the opportunity, which is increasingly being sought, for non-domiciles to accrue capital gains in the United Kingdom on which they do not pay tax. One of the reasons is that the tax avoidance principles do not apply to non-domiciles in relation to capital gains tax, and it is therefore relatively easy to shift capital gains tax into overseas trusts.

A third example, although tricky and technical, illustrates the opportunities that are now becoming available. It has generally been assumed that while it is possible for non-domiciles to find a way of not paying income tax and capital gains tax, inheritance tax is payable and is paid. One tax adviser, however, has described the mechanisms that are developing to prevent its being paid.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks of taxes that it is difficult or impossible for non-domiciles to evade. Will he confirm that the one tax that they cannot avoid paying is the council tax that he proposes to abolish?

Dr. Cable: We are talking about people who are extraordinarily rich. The amount paid in capital gains tax is so trivial that it hardly makes a difference to the sums we are describing. If one is Mr. Mittal and one has just bought a £50 million house, paying £1,500 to the local council hardly constitutes a major contribution to British revenue.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): The Conservatives introduced a council tax system under which £150 million a year was used to subsidise second homes for the wealthy when many thousands of people in constituencies like mine did not have a first home. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in contrast to the Conservatives, we need to think of ways of introducing a fair system to ensure that where scarce housing must be rationed, it is given to those who need it rather than to the wealthy who simply take advantage of second homes for investment purposes?

Dr. Cable: My hon. Friend is right, and he has helpfully prompted me to mention something that I omitted from my remarks about capital gains tax taper relief. Clearly if people buy property and hold it for 10

[Dr. Cable]

years as individuals—if not as companies—and resell it as an investment, that not only bids up prices in areas such as his, but provides a substantial tax shelter for the individuals concerned.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) implied that payment of council tax by the rich somehow compensated for their avoidance of other taxes on a grand scale. Someone in a property in this borough of Westminster—the one owned by the Mittals, say, which is worth £48 million—paying band H council tax is probably paying less than an ordinary working person in a band D house in North-West Leicestershire. That is not much of a compensation, is it?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman has made my point for me, in a striking way.

Mr. Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman also think it unfair that well-off people who are legally settled in Britain and paying taxes here can buy every new issue of national savings and accumulate a very large sum which is entirely free from tax on income and capital gains? Does he want to stop that as well?

Dr. Cable: To be honest, I have not reflected on the concession that is given. I would rather reflect on it than attempt a glib answer, and as that was an interesting question, I shall do so.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in allowing a series of interventions. May I return to his point about taper relief on non-business assets over 10 years? Does he recognise that within that gain, in the absence of indexation, is a significant element of inflationary gain? Will he comment on his party's proposals, which involve taxing what is a purely inflationary gain at the end of that period?

Dr. Cable: It is true that in the report we published we did not set out how an inflation taper system might operate. I certainly accept intellectually that inflation should be compensated for in some way, and when we are called on to set out our policy in more detail, we shall describe how that can be done.

I also acknowledge, as the hon. Gentleman has raised this broader question, that when it comes to capital gains tax there are certain benefits from the taper relief. It was designed to encourage particular types of company. Defending the position that I am taking, Lady Noakes, a Conservative spokesman on these matters, inquired in another place:

"My Lords, does the Minister agree that some of the tax incentives utilised by private equity were designed to support and encourage real venture capital? If he agrees, can he explain why investment in early-stage companies has declined from 10 per cent in 1998 to 2 per cent in 2005?"—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 July 2007; Vol. 693, c. 1285.]

The original objectives of the concession have clearly not been met.

I am happy to take interventions, but I was interrupted at a point at which I was trying to explain about the complex ways in which sophisticated tax advisers can help non-domiciles to avoid paying inheritance tax, which is one of the most difficult taxes to avoid in the United Kingdom. According to Mr. Tailby-Faulkes, whom I quoted earlier,

"UK property is always within the IHT net on the death of the owner, even if they haven't been domiciled in the UK.

A simple way to mitigate this is to have a mortgage on the property... But one problem is that if foreign income or gains are used by the foreign domiciled borrower to pay the mortgage then these will be taxable remittances."

That is a problem, but he has thought his way through it:

"A solution can be to take out a loan with a foreign lender; as long as this is on interest-only terms, using foreign income and gains to pay the interest costs will not count as a taxable remittance."

There are mechanisms to deal with even the most intractable tax-avoidance problems.

It was precisely because of that set of concerns that the Prime Minister, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, wished to initiate a review of the whole question, which he did in the 2002 pre-Budget report. He said:

"Building on this work, the Treasury and the Inland Revenue will assess how the current rules work in practice, and will publish a background paper to aid discussion of how the rules compare with the Government's principles."

What happened to that 2002 initiative? No report has ever been published, no review of policy has ever been described, and no calculations have ever emerged to establish whether or not it would be beneficial to the United Kingdom.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): When our hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Norman Baker) asked that very question during Treasury questions last week, he received the following answer:

"The Government's review of the residence and domicile rules is ongoing. The Government are mindful that any change to the current system would need to balance carefully the principles of ensuring fairness and of promoting the UK's international competitiveness."—[*Official Report*, 12 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1605.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that if the review is "ongoing", it is about time we received a report?

Dr. Cable: One would have thought that five years might produce a less bland analysis of the issue. In the meantime, some of us have been trying to find out how far the Treasury progressed with its inquiries and what are the preliminary results. I asked the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Normanton (Ed Balls)—now Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families—about that some months ago. When I asked him specifically how much tax had been forgone as a result of the concession, he replied:

"Estimates of the tax forgone in the UK as a consequence of the use of the remittance basis by those not domiciled in the UK are not routinely made... No estimates have been made of the economic benefits to the UK from the retention of the domicile laws on taxation."—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2007; Vol. 459, c. 1383W.]

That was five years after the study had been initiated.

Part of the problem with the right hon. Gentleman's answer is that—although I am sure that this was not intentional—it is not actually true. The Government

have been obliged on several occasions to divulge the results of their work. A few years ago, a freedom of information request by a magazine called *Accountancy Age* produced what is described as "a heavily redacted memo" from the Inland Revenue to the Paymaster General, dated 15 December 2003. The memo contained the statement:

"Many non-domiciled residents pay substantial amounts of UK tax. We estimate that, in total, they pay about £5 billion in UK tax and NICs but only escape tax of about £1 billion of unremitted income and gains."

Therefore, there is a basis for an analysis—and, indeed, there might be a positive outcome.

I repeatedly press the Government for updates on those figures and more detailed analysis, and the answer I receive is remarkably secretive. The latest statement from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is:

"HMRC does hold some information prepared since 1 January 2005...but we are not proposing to disclose that information because we think that the information is subject to an exemption under section 35 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000—information held for the formulation or development of government policy."

I ask the following obvious question: what on earth have the Government got to hide? If this is a beneficial relationship—if it is to the benefit of the UK economy—why do the Government not publish, given they have nothing to lose? All we are asking for is a straightforward statement of the benefits to the UK in tax terms, the revenue that is being forgone and a balanced evaluation of whether this is good for the UK economy. In the final analysis it might well be a perfectly sensible arrangement that is necessary in a globalised world economy, but I would like to see such a proper analysis of that. Instead, the Treasury have addressed the matter in a secretive manner.

David Taylor: Does the hon. Gentleman accept the thesis of the previous Government—and, indeed, of the current one—that any vigorous attempt to tighten the domicile rules will undermine the City's role as a global financial centre? Does he acknowledge that there is a trade-off, and at what point would he be willing to trade off some flexibility on the definition of domiciled status?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right that there is a trade-off, and it would be foolish to be dogmatic one way or the other.

I have another quote on non-domicile tax relief from a leading City tax specialist, Richard Murphy:

"When I have sat with Treasury officials and asked them why don't they do something about this, it is because they are frightened the money will leave London and they think there is a benefit to this."

We say, "Quantify the benefit." That is all that we are asking for. The benefit could indeed be huge—as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said. If so, why is the Treasury so frightened of making the case? One would have thought that it would be a straightforward and easy case to make, but in almost five years of deliberation the Treasury have clammed up completely in terms of giving any facts or analysis of the situation.

One reason why the Treasury ought to focus on this question is that it appears to be easy to get non-domiciled status. I was not aware that that was the case until one of my staff who has a grandfather from Switzerland made inquiries. He asked, "If I wanted to become a non-domicile taxpayer, how would I do that?" Those who wish to do so get a four-page form which must be filled in. So far as I am aware, there is no extensive vetting by the Inland Revenue. They just proceed, even though they might have very tenuous connections with the UK. It might be for that reason that the number of those involved is rising rapidly: there were 105,000 in 2003-04, 112,000 in 2004-05, and perhaps the Minister will tell us how many have been granted that status since.

I do not wish to make a dogmatic case for or against this form of tax relief for very wealthy people. Like the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), my instinct is that there could be some sensible limitations. One obvious limitation would be to restrict the number of years for which it is possible to enjoy non-domiciled status. Allowing that period to go back to the era of people's grandparents or parents seems to me to be remarkably generous. A period of 20 years, which would align with the inheritance tax rules, might be a fair compromise. It would also be fair and right that even if we were to allow non-domiciled investors to continue, in the interests of the City, to enjoy tax relief on their overseas income—although I should say in passing that the Americans do not allow that—some specific exemptions, such as that capital gains tax is not subject to anti-avoidance rules, clearly should be dealt with.

I hope that what I have said will stimulate debate on the non-domiciled rules—I do not think we have ever had one during my 10 years in Parliament. I have said a little about capital gains tax, and I wish to talk briefly about a couple of other major taxes of importance to the very wealthy.

Steve Webb: Before my hon. Friend moves on, he mentioned anti-avoidance and I ask him to touch briefly on the concept of a generalised anti-avoidance rule. I am a layperson in terms of these matters, but I have always felt that a presumption that active avoidance techniques should be ruled out as a point of principle would be preferable to the current piecemeal approach. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Dr. Cable: Yes. We have argued for that, and I believe that the Government want to move in that direction, although they have been slow in implementing that. What my hon. Friend proposes is obviously right and would make it more difficult for companies to set up in business with the specific purpose of promoting anti-avoidance. The Government have made it clear that they want to tighten up where they can. However, the Government are having a drive on tax evasion, as opposed to tax avoidance. They have offered a generous amnesty to large numbers of very wealthy people who have not been paying taxes that they legally should have paid. A perfect combination of policies would be to pursue assiduously the evaders while tightening up on avoidance.

David Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. On the appropriate approach to avoidance schemes, will he look at the early-day motion 1652 that I have co-sponsored, which draws attention

[David Taylor]

to the regrettable attitude of the five big accountancy firms to devising, promoting and implementing tax avoidance schemes on a grand scale that have no commercial substance? Those firms are heavily involved in artificial loans, fictitious assets, secretive trusts and transfer pricing, which deprive the Exchequer of billions of pounds every year and therefore restrict social investment, and which transfer the load of financing public services to taxpayers with less means than the very rich people whom those five accountancy firms service.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I am sure that those firms would say that as long as the system permits it, why should they not pursue fee income from their clients? The only way to prevent that would be to have the kind of rule that has been described. It is my understanding that the Government want to move in that direction. Will the Minister tell us how far they have got?

Julia Goldsworthy: My hon. Friend might be interested to know that during discussions of this year's Finance Bill there was some evidence of mini general anti-avoidance rules being discussed in terms of issues such as stamp duty land taxation. However, the industry's concern is that that might be in addition to the existing Government regulation, and it asks for a simplification instead of additions to the already complex taxation system.

Dr. Cable: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She worked extremely hard on the Finance Bill and is much closer to the technical issues than I am, and I am sure that she is right.

Let me say a few words on unfairness in relation to other taxes that bear upon wealth. Stamp duty is a tax on transactions rather than a wealth tax, but it does relate to property assets. Two elements of unfairness should be dealt with. The first involves what is technically known as the slab system. When a certain threshold is reached—£250,000 for the 3 per cent. limit—the purchaser pays the full 3 per cent. on the total sum. Therefore, somebody who purchases what is nowadays quite a modest house pays £7,500. Somebody who buys a house worth £500,000—in much of south-east England that would be a modest home—will pay 4 per cent. on that total, which amounts to a £20,000 tax bill in cash. That is an extremely onerous form of taxation and, moreover, it is not progressive.

Another beneficial loophole to those who are well organised and wealthy means that if they arrange to buy a house through a corporate offshore vehicle, they can pay as little as 0.5 per cent. stamp duty. Many very wealthy people use that loophole. I am surprised that the Government have not alighted on that problem in their efforts to combat tax evasion.

Mr. Philip Hammond: I carefully read the Liberal Democrat document that was published last week, and I have a question about the slab versus the slice system. The hon. Gentleman proposes to move from the slab to the slice, but will he confirm whether that will apply at the £500,000 threshold, or is the document suggesting that when £500,000 is reached, the entire value of the property will become subject to the 4 per cent. rate from the first pound?

Dr. Cable: We are recommending the principle that it should apply up the scale. Exactly how that will operate depends substantially on the state of the property market. If the hon. Gentleman wants a good description of how a reformed stamp duty system would work, several years ago the Council of Mortgage Lenders produced a set of numbers showing how a progressive scale of charges would work. We would endorse that principle, although the detailed arithmetic would have to be reworked in the light of current numbers.

Andrew George: I apologise for dragging my hon. Friend back to property taxation and capital gains tax on second homes. The issue is not just raising fair taxes on those with wealth, but using the available records of those who would have to pay capital gains tax as a means of rationing properties through the planning system if a change-in-use class order were introduced, as our party proposes. Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue is not just fair taxation, but using the tax system to ensure that properties can be rationed so that those in the most desperate housing need, rather than second home owners, get properties?

Dr. Cable: I would quibble a little over the word "rationed", but the sentiment of my hon. Friend's intervention was helpful and supportive, and I agree with him.

I do not want to spend long on inheritance tax because those who suffered through discussion of the Finance Bills of the past few years—my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) soldiered on the front line—have talked about inheritance tax ad nauseam for hours, if not days. There are some odd features of the way in which the inheritance tax system has worked out in recent years, and the numbers are simple. Since 2000, the number of estates valued at more than £2 million for inheritance tax has declined by 8 per cent., in the context of an enormous increase in the number of properties worth more than £2 million. The number actually paying inheritance tax has fallen. On the other hand, the number of estates valued at between £300,000 and £500,000 has increased by 20 per cent. Essentially, the tax is voluntary for those at the top end of the scale because they have access to sophisticated advice, while middle class families—that is essentially what we are talking about—who are not familiar with the various devices available to them, particularly through gifts, are paying the tax, unaware of the potential for avoiding it. Clearly that is fundamentally unsatisfactory.

I shall summarise a few of our proposed steps to make the system fairer—they are modest, and part of a much more comprehensive approach to taxation—to bring together the threads of my argument. First, it is clear that the reliefs on capital gains tax—such as taper relief—should go because they are expensive, unfair and reward wealth unsatisfactorily with no evidence that they produce significant economic change of behaviour.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): On capital gains tax, if I remember correctly, the personal allowance is £8,800. Where do the Liberal Democrats see that allowance going? Will it fall to £1,000, as was suggested last year when they published their previous document?

Dr. Cable: That is a fair question, and we have reconsidered the issue in the light of discussion with people in the investment industry. We did indeed propose a substantial reduction in the allowance, and we have rethought it. Our current proposals, which are set out in our report, make no suggestion of changing the level of allowances, for the simple reason that a large number of small investors would otherwise be caught. The hon. Gentleman asked a sharp question, and picked up on the fact that our proposals suggest a modest change.

Secondly, we propose some tightening up of the non-domicile rules. We do not want to abandon them, but we want to change the residency requirements, and to cut back on some of the provisions, particularly concerning capital gains tax. Thirdly, we want to tighten the rules applying to corporates buying property and escaping stamp duty. We want to clamp down on inheritance tax avoidance by extending the seven-year rule on gifts to 15 years.

Behind those policies are bigger ones, notably, as the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman intervened to say, abolishing council tax because in relation to income it is highly regressive, and much the most regressive of all forms of taxation. We want to scrap it entirely, and to replace it with a tax based on people's ability to pay—their income. That would help to improve the overall equity of the tax and distribution system.

The Government have talked a great deal about progressive consensus and fairness. They have presided over a system of distribution of income and wealth that has not improved income and has deteriorated in terms of wealth. Taxation clearly has a part in correcting that, and I commend the motion to the House.

8.16 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Andy Burnham): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes that since 1997, the Government has undertaken a comprehensive programme of reform to the tax system, which has encouraged saving and rewarded enterprise, reduced child poverty, supported hard-working families and provided security for all in old age, and welcomes the fact that these reforms strike the right balance between encouraging enterprise and investment, maintaining the UK's international competitiveness and delivering a modern and fair tax system, in which all pay their fair share of tax."

Let me begin with some facts that provide the essential context for this debate. In this financial year, the top 1 per cent. of earners—those with a pre-tax income of £117,000—will pay 22 per cent. of all income tax. The top 5 per cent. will pay 41 per cent., and the top 10 per cent. will pay 52 per cent. of all income tax gathered.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Andy Burnham: I was about to say that to most normal people, if not Lib Dems, those figures would suggest that the income tax system in this country was both fair and progressive, but if they want to correct me I will gladly give way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I call Mr. Edward Davey.

Steve Webb: It is Steve Webb, Madam Deputy Speaker, although if I say something silly, it is my hon. Friend.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sorry. I call Steve Webb.

Steve Webb: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Chief Secretary said that the richest 1 per cent. of income earners pay 22 per cent. of income tax, but that statistic is meaningless unless we know what proportion of income they have. Can he tell us what proportion of income the richest 1 per cent. have?

Andy Burnham: I do not know whether that is a question from the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) or the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb). The important point is that the top 1 per cent. pay 22 per cent. of all income tax, and they are people with a pre-tax income of £117,000.

Julia Goldsworthy *rose—*

Andy Burnham: I must make some progress, but I shall give way again.

Julia Goldsworthy: In welcoming the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, perhaps I could help him with some information. Is he aware that the richest 20 per cent. pay a lower proportion of their income in tax than the poorest 20 per cent.?

Andy Burnham: I shall come to some of the figures, but it is interesting that the minute I raise the subject of taxes, Liberal Democrat Members get excited and want to pick holes. That suggests that they are slightly sensitive about the subject. I did not hear the words "pips" or "squeak" during the contribution of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), but I would not have been surprised if they had crept in at some point.

In this country, we have a system of taxation that is both progressive and fair, and it has underpinned an unprecedented period of economic growth in this country—59 consecutive quarters, to be precise—and unprecedented investment in our public services. Any proposals for change that could put that hard-won stability and prosperity at risk would need to be considered very carefully—particularly any proposals for more radical change. That is the problem with today's debate. I think it was originally entitled "Fair taxation for the super-rich".

Mr. Philip Hammond *indicated assent.*

Andy Burnham: The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond)—I welcome him to his new Front-Bench role—nods in agreement. Those

[Andy Burnham]

words have strangely disappeared from the title of today's debate. The point is that tax is complicated, as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made clear. Any changes to taxation need to be informed by a balanced view across the whole economy and considered in the round. By taking one issue in isolation, as the hon. Gentleman did, he and his colleagues are seeking to suggest that there are easy answers and easy targets. That is the politics of the student union. Coupled with last week's optimistic proposals for income tax giveaways, it can be concluded that the timing of today's debate suggests a certain nervousness about upcoming by-elections on Thursday.

Over the past 10 years, the Government have had a record to be proud of in increasing fairness in our tax system and society. We have made the tax system fairer by closing loopholes and clamping down on tax avoidance to ensure that everyone pays the right amount at the right time and pays their fair share. We have reformed the tax and benefits system to help to create a fairer society, providing more support for work, families and pensioners and cutting child and pensioner poverty, both of which were rising in 1997. In developing our tax policy, we have recognised that the surest foundation for a fair society is stable macro-economic performance that delivers jobs, growth and opportunity for all.

Under this Government, Britain is better off. Household net wealth is the highest that it has ever been, up 65 per cent. from 1997. There are 1.8 million more home owners than 10 years ago and the average household is £1,000 a year better off because of our changes to the tax and benefits system. From April next year, we will cut the basic rate of income tax to its lowest rate for more than 75 years. It is not the super-rich who are benefiting from the changes but those in the lowest income decile, who have seen the greatest percentage increase in their net income as a result of our tax and benefit changes. Between 1979 and 1997, the poorest 20 per cent. of households saw their income grow by less than 1 per cent. a year in real terms, while the richest 20 per cent. saw theirs grow by more than three times as much. Since 1997, the poorest 20 per cent. of households have seen their income grow by 2.2 per cent. a year—faster than that of the richest 20 per cent. So the Government have halted the dramatic rise in household income inequality that the country saw in the '80s and early '90s.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that without the Government's reforms to the tax and benefits system, income inequality would have continued to rise sharply. In 1997, the UK had the highest child poverty rate in Europe. Since then, we have reduced child poverty faster than anywhere in Europe, with 600,000 children lifted out of relative poverty. The number of children in absolute poverty has been halved. To build on those achievements, this year's reforming Budget went further with plans to simplify the tax system, to provide help for pensioners and support for families, and to make work pay. As a result, four in five households will see no change or will be better off. Increases in child tax credit will help lower to middle income families and help the Government to take a further 200,000 children out of relative poverty. Some 580,000 pensioners will be lifted out of income tax altogether.

I have spent time setting out that record because it provides the context for the consideration of the issues that the hon. Member for Twickenham has brought to us today. He began his remarks by calling for "a greater attention to the distribution of income and wealth"—if I quote him correctly. It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman called such a debate when I believe that he called the Government's increases in the national minimum wage "dangerous". That is a difficult position for him to hold when he begins a debate by preaching to this side of the House about the distribution of income and wealth.

Dr. Cable: Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Andy Burnham: I will give way, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will confirm that that was what he said.

Dr. Cable: It was not what I said. I and my party have voted for the minimum wage and—in Committee—for every increase. I said that it would be dangerous if the Government proceeded with increases in the minimum wage that were not aligned with the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission, which governs the minimum wage. The context is quite different. We are fully supportive of the minimum wage and the increases that have taken place. *[Interruption.]*

Andy Burnham: I will not apologise. Let us say that the hon. Gentleman is ambivalent, at the least. I recall hearing him or one of his colleagues calling for a regional minimum wage, and that is different from a national minimum wage, which this party introduced and to which we remain steadfastly committed. It is a different thing, and at the very least people who are watching this debate will conclude that there is a certain ambivalence on the part of the hon. Gentleman on that issue.

Today, the hon. Gentleman was noticeably silent on the tax proposals that he introduced last week. He made a long speech, going into all possible corners of the tax system, but did not dwell on the new package of proposals that he put forward last week. I read them, like the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge—it is terrible that we have to spend our weekends reading Lib Dem tax documents, but such is life. But it was raining anyway and what else can one do on a wet Saturday? I want to challenge the hon. Member for Twickenham to tell me in simple terms what the proposals would do to "improve" the distribution of income or wealth in this country. May I ask him—

Dr. Cable *rose—*

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman wants to intervene again, but he should let me ask the question first. Am I right to say that reducing stamp duty on properties worth up to £500,000 and raising the inheritance tax threshold to the same amount would not benefit everyone in this country and perhaps only a certain few?

Dr. Cable: The Chief Secretary asked me what effect the proposal would have on income distribution. Our analysis, which has been corroborated by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, is that it would benefit all income groups except for the top decile.

Andy Burnham: Let me give the hon. Gentleman my analysis, and that of the Treasury, of some of the proposals. Unless I am mistaken, he did not mention this once in his remarks, but the proposal is to cut 4p off the basic rate of income tax. Our calculation is that that would cost £18 billion in 2008-09—he agrees with that—and £19 billion in 2009-10. That is a lot of tax on petrol or flights. If he is suggesting that he can raise that amount by closing "tax loopholes", it is a big claim to make.

Our analysis shows that Liberal Democrats' policy would most benefit the highest earners. About one in five households in the bottom income decile would gain, whereas all households in the top income decile would gain. The average gain per household increases as one goes up the income scale, with households in the top decile gaining, on average, 50 times the amount of households in the bottom decile. Three quarters of the cost of that policy would be spent on the top four income deciles, with one quarter going to the top income decile alone. Less than 1 per cent. of the total cost would be spent on households in the bottom decile. True or false?

Julia Goldsworthy: Has the Chief Secretary compared the impact that he has just described with the impact of a 2p cut in the basic rate of income tax across the income distribution bands? What would be different?

Andy Burnham: I invited a response on the point that I was making. The debate was called by the Liberal Democrats and I began by laying out some of the Government's policies. The figures that I have given for the Liberal Democrats' policies are staggering for a party that has come to the House this evening talking about narrowing the income gap and lecturing the Government. I note that there has been no effort to repudiate my analysis.

We should think about the income distribution effects of the Liberal Democrats' proposed changes and then about their proposal for a local income tax. In his report on local government finance, Sir Michael Lyons concluded that a local income tax was feasible, but he added that it would mean

"substantial increases in tax for the working population."

In addition, green taxes would have to bear the brunt of achieving the huge savings that would be needed to deliver a 4p income tax cut. What on earth would that do to the taxes on travel faced by the average family? Would an annual holiday be put beyond the reach of the average family in my constituency? I believe that they would struggle if the cost of holidays were to increase significantly. The hon. Member for Twickenham was noticeably silent on all those points and I am amazed that he did not refer once to his party's proposals in his speech.

Let me talk about some of the changes that the Government have made to tackle avoidance and to close loopholes. We have taken steps to make sure that everyone pays their fair share of taxes and we have acted in respect of each of the personal taxes. In response to contrived avoidance schemes to avoid income tax and national insurance contributions, usually marketed to a small number of individuals receiving substantial City bonuses, we made a clear statement in December 2004 that future schemes would be legislated against with effect from that date, not from the date of the legislation. We estimate that, had that statement not been made, more than £1.7 billion of tax and national insurance contributions would have been avoided through such schemes.

More recently, we have acted against abuses of sideways loss relief, with a fair and proportionate response that allows SLR to be used for legitimate business reasons but protects £760 million—three quarters of a billion pounds—in tax. We have also acted to prevent avoidance of inheritance tax by introducing pre-owned asset rules in 2004 that take a fair share of tax when someone gives away an asset but continues to benefit from it. On capital gains tax, this year's Finance Bill, which is to be debated in another place tomorrow, introduces a targeted anti-avoidance rule designed to put an end to the contrived schemes that avoid tax by generating artificial losses. On stamp duty land tax, the same Bill permanently closes down schemes that avoid tax by adding extra stages to the sale of property from one party to another.

The changes to capital gains tax and stamp duty land tax in the Finance Bill have been introduced as a result of information received by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs through the disclosure regime that was first introduced in 2004. That regime, which obliges the promoters of avoidance schemes to disclose them to HMRC, is allowing us to act against avoidance more swiftly and in a more targeted way. The capital gains tax and stamp duty land tax measures demonstrate that the regime is having a deterrent effect, with marketed schemes decreasing significantly. In addition to acting against contrived avoidance, we are tackling tax evasion. For example, HMRC has obtained details of hundreds of thousands of offshore account holders from a number of banks and expects to collect hundreds of millions of tax that had been evaded, as well as interest and penalties.

As well as delivering rising prosperity for all in what the IMF described in February as a

"decade-long record of strong and steady macroeconomic performance",

Britain is now benefiting from the longest period of sustained low inflation—certainly the longest in my lifetime. We have the second-highest GDP in the G7, instead of the lowest, as when we entered office, and growth that is not only strong—stronger this year than in the euro-area and in the United States—but sustained. As I said, we have experienced 59 quarters of uninterrupted growth—the longest period on record for any G7 country. Even if the UK's economy were to stop growing tomorrow, which of course we do not expect it to, it would take at least nine years for any other major economy to overtake that record. That macro-economic performance, that stability and that strength in our economy have delivered rising standards of living and rising prosperity right across Britain, and it is important to say that this is not a zero sum game. We do not have to make some people poorer

[Andy Burnham]

to make others richer; we have shown that over the past 10 years. We want our good macro-economic performance to continue, and we want Britain's economy to continue to succeed. We are confident about the position that we are in, but of course we must not be complacent. There are challenges that we need to face, including that of globalisation.

As technological advances and falling transport costs break down the barriers to trade and economic integration, we have to be watchful, and we must ensure that the increasingly interconnected world economy continues to work well for Britain and our national interests. Capital and labour are increasingly mobile; that is particularly true of highly skilled individuals, who are increasingly in demand as the world moves towards a more skills-based economy. That presents some challenges, but also huge opportunities, and the UK is making the most of them. With skills increasingly at a premium, we will benefit from our hugely talented work force. That is partly the result of our high-quality education provision and training, but it is also because of the openness and internationalism that characterises the City: one quarter of London's senior managers in financial and business services come from abroad.

I will pause to reflect on the City for a moment, because its performance in recent years has been truly remarkable. London is now established as the world's leading global financial centre, and Britain has a trade surplus in financial services that is twice as large as any to be found elsewhere in the world; it totalled £26 billion last year. The wealth that the City generates is critical to our economy, and we have worked hard to maintain its competitiveness. We will continue to work hard to build on the City's leading position, and we will work with the City, including through the high-level group that the Prime Minister set up when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. I encourage the hon. Member for Twickenham and his colleagues to reflect on the City's strong position when they consider the changes that he proposed today.

The hon. Gentleman spent a good deal of his speech talking about the rules affecting non-domiciled individuals. That is a complex area, but we are talking about a relatively small group—it is made up of some 112,000 people, according to the latest estimates. That group declares some £9.8 billion through the self-assessment process, but it is important to note that it contributes £3 billion in tax, and it behoves the hon. Gentleman to recognise that. That is a significant contribution, and it is not correct to perpetuate the idea that there is serial avoidance by that group.

It is not right to suggest that it is easy to gain non-domiciled status. A person's domicile is the country to which they are attached from birth to the age of 16. A person usually has the same domicile as their father, and at the age of 16, they may have a domicile of choice, often through the nationality of their father. It is not my understanding that someone could gain non-domiciled status on the back of a tenuous link—I think that that is the phrase that the hon. Gentleman used—with a country. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with more details on that point, I will be interested to read what he says, but it is not easy to change status in the way that he suggests.

Julia Goldsworthy: I would be grateful if the Chief Secretary to the Treasury clarified a point for me. My understanding is that it is possible to inherit non-domiciled status. If someone's parent was non-domiciled, they could claim non-domiciled status. That is what I inferred from his remarks. Is that the case?

Andy Burnham: I believe that it is the case, and if it is not, I will correct what I said. I was referring to a comment made by the hon. Member for Twickenham, in which he appeared to suggest that a person working in his office who had a Swiss grandfather could, on the back of that, achieve non-domiciled status for tax purposes. That is not my understanding, and it is not right to suggest that it is easy to gain that status. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that we are talking about complex changes that would have an impact not only on the economic competitiveness of the country, but on other parts of the tax system.

It is important to avoid knee-jerk responses, to give careful consideration to any proposed changes, and to have consultation on any proposals. The tone of some of the hon. Gentleman's remarks suggested that this was a relatively easy target. He made great play of the 4p cut in income tax and seemed to set great store by it, but how much money would he raise to pay for that £18 billion spending commitment?

Dr. Cable: If the hon. Gentleman has read the report, as he said that he had amused himself over the weekend by doing, he will have seen that the arithmetic is quite carefully set out and that it is balanced. We estimated that the cost of the 4p cut would be rather more than £18 billion—closer to £20 billion. Perhaps we were conservative, but it would be paid for partly by the capital gains tax taper relief, which is about £6 billion, partly by the environmental taxes, which he has fairly referred to and which we can debate, which are of roughly the same order of magnitude, with the balance to be paid for by restricting pension contribution tax relief to the standard rate. Those are the three components and if he has read the report, he will have seen that it balances.

Andy Burnham: I saw some press coverage of that arithmetic. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have not been in the Treasury for long and he is well versed in these matters, but I suspect that in his heart of hearts he knows that these are optimistic policies, to say the least. That was the word that I heard civil servants use today to describe some of these plans. We all know what optimistic means in this context, and if the average family realised what burden would be loaded on to their petrol bill or their annual family holiday bill to make some of this tax burden even vaguely fundable, they would have some serious second thoughts about what the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have in mind.

During the last few days there has been a significant debate on taxation as it affects families, particularly married couples. Not having a great deal to do at the weekend, I read through all the press cuttings, and it was interesting to see the different views beginning to emerge from the Conservative party following the publication of the document last week by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green

(Mr. Duncan Smith). The key proposal for a marriage tax break would take billions of pounds out of public services and support for all families and help married couples at the expense of other children. It was interesting to see how quickly some began to back off. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) characteristically had the courage to go on the record and he was quoted in *The Times* on Friday as saying:

"For the life of me, I cannot see why one should give a prize to people with no children, simply because they happen to be married."

One can only speculate as to the identity of the "modernising Tory MP" quoted in *The Times* on Friday as saying:

"This is straight back to the 'nasty party'. God knows why David has done it."

It is interesting to follow the ups and downs of the debates in the Tory party that seem to be ebbing and flowing outside the public view. But even more staggering when one reads the document published last week is that not only was there the cost of the marriage tax break, but on a conservative estimate, some £10.9 billion of spending commitments. How on earth all that adds up when one considers the policy of sharing the proceeds of growth is beyond me. I hope that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge will enlighten us this evening when he makes his remarks. We agree with two conclusions of the Conservative social policy group, however. In December 2006, it concluded:

"For the past 10 years, inflation has been low, the stop-go cycle has given way to continued economic growth and there has been full employment."

We certainly endorse those conclusions.

All the actions that the Government take will go to continuing to improve the competitiveness of our economy, coupled with reforms that will continue to increase fairness in the tax system. We will continue to make those changes because we need to recognise the realities of a modern, global economy, with the increasing mobility of labour. The Chancellor has made it clear that on many of the issues that the hon. Member for Twickenham has raised this evening, such as taper relief or the residence and domicile rules, we will not make changes without thinking them through. We will not have the knee-jerk reactions that some call for these days. Changes to the tax system must be properly considered and carefully thought through in the context of what is best for the economy overall, and that is what we will do.

This issue is about striking the right balance—a careful balance between competitiveness and fairness. It is about recognising that we do not have to penalise the rich or make them poorer to make everyone else better off, although we expect them to play by the rules. We have shown that we will take action to ensure that they pay their fair share of tax. This Labour Government have shown over the past decade that we can strike the right balance for Britain, and raise prosperity for everyone while providing the most support to those people who most need it. The incomes of the poorest households have grown faster than those of the richest, and we have increased fairness in our society by cutting child and pensioner poverty.

On the back of a tax announcement last week, the Liberal Democrats have moved this evening a motion that on any reading does not enhance the position of people earning the least in our society. On that specific point, I challenged the Liberal Democrats to come forward with measures that would, as the hon. Member for Twickenham said at the beginning of his remarks, close the gap in wealth and income and produce a fairer distribution of wealth. The loading of taxes on to petrol and aviation would have a major regressive effect and hit hardest those families on the lowest incomes. The 4p cut in income tax would benefit the highest earners in society, not those in the lowest decile. The local income tax would load taxation on to the working population, and move it away from people who do not work. One must consider the combination of all those factors when analysing the package that has been put forward.

By contrast, we have undertaken a comprehensive programme of tax system reform, which has increased fairness by closing tax loopholes. We have tackled tax avoidance and provided support for workers, families and pensioners, cut child and pensioner poverty and struck the right balance between fairness and competitiveness. By striking that balance and making tax changes only after thinking through their impact, rather than seeking short-term headlines to assuage fears about by-election performances, we have shown that by making the right decisions and thinking them through properly, we can deliver macro-economic stability, success and rising prosperity for the whole country. I urge the House to vote against the Liberal Democrat motion, and I commend the Government's amendment to the House.

8.49 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Chief Secretary for his kind words of welcome, which I reciprocate. I look forward to a constructive debate with him over the coming months and possibly even years.

I do not want to spoil the Liberals' day, but perhaps I can deal with the Chief Secretary's comments about marriage—he will be pleased to hear that the position of shadow Chief Secretary is no different from that of Chief Secretary. He knows that the excellent and exhaustive report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) is just that—it is a report to the Conservative party with a series of sometimes expensive recommendations that we will consider very carefully. With the benefit of our "Stand up, Speak up" campaign to consult the people of Britain on those issues and many others, we will, in due course, introduce carefully costed proposals, which the Chief Secretary will be able to analyse and which we will be happy to debate with him.

Few areas are as politically charged as personal taxation, and there are few areas where the temptation to play to the gallery is stronger. There is a great scope for cruel deception in this area. Static models can be served up for popular consumption suggesting that there are easy wins for hard-pressed taxpayers by raising taxes on the undeserving rich. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), by his background and his training, should understand better than most the pitfalls of pursuing

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

that route. In that area above all others, there is an overpowering need for mature debate and for ensuring that the economic head rules the political heart.

Sadly, despite the measured tone of his remarks, the hon. Member for Twickenham appears to have succumbed to the temptation to cash in on a popular media feeding frenzy. As the Chief Secretary has noted, the Liberal Democrat motion focuses on the taxation of the wealthy. It follows suspiciously closely the publication last week of a Liberal Democrat document, which proposes a cut in the basic rate of tax. That risks the accusation of shamelessly playing the politics-of-envy card.

Julia Goldsworthy: While we are on the theme of shifting the policy perspective allegedly in response to potential publicity, which of the following comments by the shadow Chancellor does the hon. Gentleman agree with? At a dinner at Claridges on 12 March, the shadow Chancellor told the British Venture Capital Association:

"The importance of your contribution to our economy is, I believe, rightly reflected in the tax treatment that you receive".

In the middle of June, however, he said that his party would support plans to raise taxes for private equity amid growing criticism that many millionaires are paying a far lower rate of tax than other workers.

Mr. Hammond: If the hon. Lady will contain herself, I will specifically address the private equity question in due course in responding to the remarks of the hon. Member for Twickenham.

I sympathise with some of the underlying concerns set out by the hon. Member for Twickenham. He expressed his position in language that was rather more moderate than the wording of the motion, but a vendetta against wealth creators is completely the wrong approach to solving the problems of income inequality. Strikingly, the motion displays a lack of vision or ambition to boost the life chances of those who are being left behind, just as the Government amendment manifests a disturbing complacency about the state of Britain.

Tackling income inequality by attacking wealth creators risks reducing inequality at the price of general impoverishment. The Chief Secretary stated that this is not a zero sum game, and Abraham Lincoln made the same point in less modern language 150 years ago: "You do not make the poor richer by making the rich poorer." The signal that we need to send is that we will encourage those who have the skills that Britain needs to move our economy up the value curve in a globalising market, and we should not send them the signal that they are unwelcome here.

Steve Webb: The hon. Gentleman condemns the Liberal Democrat motion and the Government amendment, but he has not tabled one himself. Does he have no views on the fair taxation of the wealthy that he wants to share with the House?

Mr. Hammond: If the hon. Gentleman listens carefully, he will hear my views over the coming 10 or 15 minutes.

The original title of the Lib Dem motion was "Taxation of the Super-Rich", which has now been changed to "Taxation of the Wealthy". That leads one to speculate on whether, if the debate had been delayed by another week or so, it would have become "Taxation of the Moderately Well-Off". Evidently even the Lib Dems have recoiled at the absurdity of describing as "super-rich" people whose incomes leave them still eligible for tax credits. One of the Sunday newspapers pointed out that while £46,000 a year for a single earner household may be a very comfortable income in many parts of the country, it is hardly David Beckham territory.

I note, too, that there is no proposal in the Liberal Democrats' tax document to reintroduce the 10p income tax band, despite their attack on its removal in the Budget. They seem keen to leave out of their calculations their long-term aspiration to increase the income tax threshold to £10,000, at a cost of £30 billion. The truth is that someone on a very low income, just falling into income tax, will still be worse off under the Liberal Democrats' income tax proposals than they would have been before the Prime Minister's Budget stealth taxes abolished the 10p rate.

The question that we need to ask ourselves, first in response to the Liberal Democrats' paper last week, and then to their motion today, is whether their plans add up. They cost them at £22.2 billion, or £52.2 billion if we include the £10,000 threshold. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether the replacement of council tax with a local income tax would be fiscally neutral, as they claim, how do they plan to pay for their cuts, and do those plans add up? The Chief Secretary focused on the broader picture. I want to look more specifically at three areas where the Liberal Democrats propose to raise taxes in order to pay for their proposed cut in the basic rate of income tax by addressing what they call the tax treatment of the rich, with new taxes on capital gains, a clampdown on non-domiciled residence, and a new tax on pension contributions. The latter has not been mentioned in any detail so far, and I would like to talk about it first.

The Lib Dems propose to scrap higher rate relief on contributions to pensions. In many ways, that epitomises their whole document—ill advised, ill timed and technically flawed. It would be hugely damaging to pension savings, it would not work, and it would not deliver the increase in tax revenue that they suggest. That means that there is already a great hole in their numbers. I think that they are saying that the proposal will contribute £7.5 billion to their funding challenge, but they do not seem to be quite sure what the number is. The document that they published last August, which also proposed abolishing the higher rate pension contribution relief, said that that would produce £4.3 billion, but the document they published last week says that exactly the same policy would produce £7.5 billion. That is a piece of Lib Dem economics for us to analyse. Whichever way, the savings ratio has slumped to an almost 50-year low—just 2.1 per cent. compared with 10 per cent. in 1997. Against that backdrop, and against that of a cross-party consensus that long-term saving for retirement needs to be encouraged, it seems deeply irresponsible to propose anything that would reduce pension saving still further.

There is an even more fundamental objection to the Lib Dem proposal—that it cannot be done. When Lord Turner's Pensions Commission considered the possibility of scrapping higher rate tax relief on pension contributions, he concluded that as long as defined benefit pensions remain a significant part of our provision, in both the public and private sectors, it was not practical to abolish higher rate relief, because when an employer pays contributions into a defined benefit scheme he does not need to attribute them to individual scheme members. None of those contributions generates tax liabilities for an individual member of the scheme, so they simply go in as a contribution by the employer.

Under the Lib Dems' proposals, every single employer contribution would have to be apportioned and a tax liability assessed for each member of the scheme. Even if that could be done, a greater problem would arise, where an employer makes up scheme deficits at the behest of the pensions regulator. In some cases, companies are putting in hundreds of millions of pounds to make up deficits in their pension schemes. Are the Lib Dems proposing that employees, who might be blissfully unaware that such contributions are being made to make good the deficit, should suddenly be landed with a tax bill for the contribution that had been paid on their behalf? The consequences of that are all too easy to predict.

The problem in the public sector is even worse. There is no fund, so there are no deficits, just a totally unfunded obligation that independent actuaries estimate at up to £1 trillion. How are public sector pension promises to be valued, and how is the cost of meeting them to be defined? Some public sector schemes already have notional employer contributions at a level of 27 or 28 per cent. of the total salary bill. If the calculation at individual level could effectively be made, NHS professionals, police officers, school headmasters, civil servants and others would be subject to a significant new tax charge on the contribution that the employer has made. That would shrink disposable incomes, and have a very understandable effect on long-term saving patterns. The proposal will not work technically, and if it did, it would have devastating consequences.

There is a big hole in the sums concerning the pension tax proposal, but what about capital gains tax changes? They risk resembling a cynical exploitation of the sense of outrage that has been whipped up by the media and the unions concerning the taxation of carried interests in private equity funds. In my party, we recognise the need for fairness in the tax system to maintain public confidence, and the Government's amendment gets it right in its reference to the need for balance. Responsible politicians must be prepared to explain the dynamic effects of tax changes that may otherwise appear superficially attractive when presented in a static model. Ignoring the behavioural changes that can be expected to flow from a given tax change is to deceive as to the likely overall consequences. We must all be willing to argue the case for what is best for Britain's economy, jobs and prosperity in the long term, even where that might mean resisting the temptation to change the tax treatment of a superficially tempting and politically vulnerable target.

Let me be clear: there is a case for looking carefully at the tax treatment of private equity. That is why the Conservative party has established a proper review of private equity and venture capital, including taxation treatment, which is being carried out for us by the European School of Management. Our objective in doing so is not to demonise an important industry, but to ensure that the tax treatment provided is appropriate to maintain the UK's competitiveness as an environment for globally important business.

No one should be under any illusion that the delivery of a tax-competitive environment is some act of altruism directed at the operators of whatever business appears to benefit. It is, rather, an act of the utmost self-interest, and our objective, which I assume the Government share, will be to set the tax regime at exactly the point that optimises investment, maintains international competitiveness and maximises the return to the UK economy as a whole.

Julia Goldsworthy: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there needs to be a point of principle rather than simply targeting or scapegoating a specific group. May I take it from his comments that the Conservative party will institute a review rather than, as the shadow Chancellor said a few weeks ago, support plans to raise taxes for private equity? Will he confirm that that policy will not go ahead and that there will be another policy review instead?

Mr. Hammond: The policy review is already under way. The European School of Management has undertaken to produce a report on the overall climate for private equity and venture capital in the UK, including the tax treatment of the sector.

Perhaps it will help the hon. Lady if I tell her that the shadow Chancellor has set out four tests which any reforms of the tax system must pass. First, they must not damage the competitiveness of the UK economy or the health of our financial services industry. We want Europe's private equity business to be based here in Britain, providing jobs and prosperity for British people. Secondly, we should reward those who take genuine risks. Thirdly, the tax system should focus on rewarding long-term investment and, fourthly, any reforms should be part of our broad project to make the tax system simpler and fairer.

Leading figures in the industry have made it clear that, if something looks like income, it would be peculiar not to tax it as income, but if it looks like genuine risk taking and entrepreneurship, we should do everything we can to encourage it. One of the dangers, which the Chief Secretary mentioned, is that the original purpose of taper relief may get lost. It is a question of throwing out babies with bathwater.

Taper relief was introduced as an alternative to indexation to protect inflationary gains from inappropriate taxation and as an incentive to entrepreneurship and risk taking. We must ensure that changes that are proposed or discussed do not lose sight of that original incentive. The proposals that the Liberal Democrats included in the paper that they published last week would hit not only private equity houses but small-scale entrepreneurs and genuine venture capitalists who fund British start-ups. The abolition of taper relief and the reduction in the annual

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

allowance to £1,000 would have that effect. The hon. Member for Twickenham—I am glad that he is back in his place—said that that was not clear, but let us examine the figures.

When the Liberal Democrats published their paper last August, they said that the benefit to the Exchequer of scrapping taper relief would be £4.5 billion and that that of reducing capital gains tax allowance to £1,000 would be £1.7 billion. That is £6.2 billion altogether. However, in the paper that they published last week, they said that the benefit of scrapping taper relief—the hon. Member for Twickenham claims that that does not include the reduction of the allowance to £1,000—would be £6 billion. That is £200 million less than last August's figures, which suggests that the tallied up benefit includes the reduction in the allowance.

Dr. Cable: The data on which we based those numbers came straight from the Treasury in answer to a parliamentary question and reflect the fact that the Treasury's estimate of the yield from the tax relief on taper has greatly increased in the past 12 months. The figures are consistent—the Institute for Fiscal Studies was invited to review them and considers that they add up.

Mr. Hammond: If we are to understand that in the course of eight months the estimated yield from scrapping taper relief has increased from £4.5 billion to £6 billion, it makes me wonder on what I can rely in the overall equation that the Liberal Democrats have calculated. [HON. MEMBERS: "They are the Treasury's figures."] We are, therefore, to work on the understanding that the Liberal Democrats have decided this July to keep the £8,800 annual allowance, which, last August, they intended to scrap. Fine. That is perfectly clear and I am grateful for that clarification.

Let me say something else to the Lib Dems about their proposals on capital gains tax. I do not know what the hon. Gentleman's purpose was in publishing those figures last week, but no serious political party that has any expectation of shouldering the burden of government would ever announce such changes to the capital gains tax system in advance. If there was the slightest danger of the Lib Dem proposals being implemented, those who held assets that were pregnant with capital gains tax liability would be able to dispose of them ahead of any such changes. It would therefore be grossly irresponsible, as well as completely self-defeating, to announce a tax change of that type in advance.

Similarly, the swipe at non-domiciled residents—people who have little if any political clout, unless they are donors to the Labour party—lands a blow on an easy target, but the evidence does not support it. The Chief Secretary is looking rather shocked, but he will know that there is a case for constantly reviewing tax treatment of that sort, albeit not in a threatening or aggressive way, but simply to ensure that it produces an overall net benefit to UK plc, not just to the individuals concerned. As the hon. Member for Twickenham pointed out, the Government's review seems to have been spectacularly ineffective, even by their standards. I have to tell the Chief Secretary that when his party's largest single donation of the year has come from a non-dom, suspicions about the management of that review are bound to arise, and he will have to deal with that.

However, the Government's manifest failure to conduct a quite proper review of the issue effectively and efficiently does not excuse the Lib Dems' announcement of a policy without researching the consequences. They claim that the proposal would increase the tax take, but at stake is £3 billion-worth of direct tax—the amount estimated to be paid by non-doms on income generated in this country or repatriated to the UK—as well as, potentially, a much bigger hit on the UK economy, as I am sure everyone would recognise, if a shake-out of the non-dom rules causes the relocation of control of significant operations from the UK to places outside it, as many in the City fear.

I am afraid that the Lib Dem numbers just do not add up. [HON. MEMBERS: "They do."] They do not. The Lib Dems claim that the IFS has validated them, but we talked to the IFS to see what it had done. What it did was merely check the arithmetic on the basis of a static model. The IFS has confirmed that it would expect the dynamic effects—the behavioural changes that those tax changes would produce—to work against the Lib Dems. A few minutes of not particularly in-depth analysis blows a significant hole in the model, leaving, I am afraid, the hon. Member for Twickenham clutching a £22.2 billion spending commitment, with precious little of his hopelessly speculative tax-raising agenda left to cover it.

Before I sit down, it is worth noting for the record that if the Lib Dems' numbers come from cloud cuckoo land, whoever wrote the Government amendment seems to be living on a different planet altogether. Try telling the thousands of families let down by the tax credits system or a business struggling to cope with the longest tax code in the world that the Government have undertaken a "comprehensive...reform" of the tax system; and tell it to the fairies that those reforms have "encouraged saving", when our savings ratio is at its lowest for 47 years. Try telling the wealth creators and risk takers in small business the length and breadth of Britain that the Government have "rewarded enterprise", when they have just raised the small companies tax rate and when they increased taxes on businesses by a total of £1 billion in the 2007 Budget.

The Liberal Democrats' tax-cutting pledge is an unfunded spending commitment. The motion before us is intended to convey the impression that squeezing the wealthy—or the super rich, depending on which day it is—can pay for their proposed largesse, whereas the truth is that the measures targeted at that group will not produce anything like the sums required. As the documents produced by the hon. Member for Twickenham show, even on his own flawed assumptions, households with incomes of £46,000 upwards will be losers—

Dr. Cable: Sixty-eight thousand.

Mr. Hammond: Single-income households with incomes of £46,000 upwards will be losers. I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman when he is

in analytical mode. He has correctly identified some of the issues, and the Government's failure to tackle them, but in playing the squeeze-the-rich card rather than focusing on the urgent actions needed to allow those at the bottom of the income scale to participate in our rising prosperity, he has let the temptation to pander to popular prejudice triumph over a cool, professional analysis of what is in Britain's best interests and what will deliver long-term, sustainable social justice.

9.15 pm

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): I congratulate the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on his promotion to the Cabinet. It was my pleasure to shadow him and the right hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy) when they were at the Department of Health while that was my responsibility, and I wish them well in their work at the Treasury.

I had planned to expatiate on Liberal views on redistribution, to ask how one can propose freedom then take money from a group of people, and to discuss what the limits on that might be. However, as the Chief Secretary has been given such duff material to work with, I thought that I ought to respond to some of his points about the Liberal Democrats' tax proposals.

The right hon. Gentleman seemed to be looking in two directions at once. He said two things about our plans. First, he said that our local income tax plans were evil because they would place a terrible burden on middle and higher incomes. He then said that our national tax plans were evil because they would give a disproportionate amount of money to the very same people. In other words, he was saying that cutting the basic rate of income tax by 4p would be dreadful because higher earners would gain, but putting local income tax up by 4p would be dreadful because higher income earners would have to pay more, and that was not fair. He cannot hold those two positions simultaneously. The Chief Secretary is a thoughtful man, and I am sure that he knows in his heart of hearts that he was given a bit of a duff text to start off with.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, for which I worked for nine years, has often been cited in the debate. It has a view of how we should assess the distributional impact of tax plans: it says that we should look at the whole package, and not pick just one bit out. The whole package includes a national basic rate cut of 4p, and a local income tax of broadly equivalent measure to take the place of the council tax. So if the national income tax cut and the local income tax offset each other, the change would be nil.

The distributional impact of our tax policy would be to scrap the council tax—which is effectively a poll tax, especially for pensioners and the low waged—and to tax more the very wealthy, those who gain from higher rate tax relief and those who buy large gas guzzlers or are frequent fliers. Those categories of people are all predominantly wealthy. The principal beneficiaries would be those on modest incomes who are hit hardest by the council tax. That is what I call fair.

Andy Burnham: I admire the hon. Gentleman's ability to rewrite the Liberal Democrats' tax plans on his feet at that speed. It was very impressive. May I explain to him what I was saying? The analysis of the 4p cut in income tax shows that those in the top income deciles would benefit disproportionately from the plan. My point was that, for lower earners, a combination of that change, coupled with a local income tax, which would transfer the burden to those in work and away from those out of work, and environmental measures such as higher petrol taxes and taxes on flights—whatever he says, lots of working families take one, two or even three flights a year—would leave middle to lower-income families in work worse off. If he can disprove that now, I would be grateful.

Steve Webb: I am very happy to do that. I shall run through the elements in the package. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument and for ease of estimate, that the local income tax rate in a particular local authority is 4p. A reduction of 4p in the national basic rate of income tax would therefore equate to 4p going on to local income tax in a local authority area. The net effect of that has to be zero. I am sure that the Minister would accept that. The net effect of the national basic rate coming down by 4p and the local income tax going up 4p has to be nil. That change has nil effect.

We then need to take into account the effect of closing pension tax relief, which is by definition only available to higher rate taxpayers who must be better off; getting rid of the capital gains tax taper relief, which overwhelmingly benefits the better off; scrapping the council tax, which is a very regressive tax whose abolition will help the poor; and then imposing environmental taxes on people who buy large gas guzzlers, who tend to be better off, and on the most frequent flyers who on average tend to be the better off—all those are progressive changes. It is impossible to understand how the effect of that whole package can be anything other than progressive—the Institute for Fiscal Studies has demonstrated that the only group who lose out is the top decile.

Julia Goldsworthy: On replacing council tax with local income tax, there is no doubt that for many people in work but on low incomes, the council tax represents more than 4 per cent. of their income.

Steve Webb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we reflect on the low paid or indeed pensioners on very modest incomes, the burden of the council tax is one of the most severe that they face.

Andy Burnham: As usual, the Liberals pick an easy target like the gas guzzlers or big SUVs and make them the whole focus of their tax policy, but is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that tax cuts on this scale could be delivered without substantially raising tax on petrol? Is he saying that everything can be loaded on to drivers of large four-wheel drive vehicles?

Steve Webb: The right hon. Gentleman said that he had spent the weekend reading our tax plans, but having heard what he just said, I am not sure that he could have done so. Our environmental package is based first on the taxation of flights. We want to tax emissions more heavily— *[Interruption.]* I will, indeed, answer the question. Some additional revenue comes from taxing half-empty flights. In other words, at the moment, air passenger duty is applied per passenger, but we propose to tax flights based on their emissions. Let me explain what that means.

[Steve Webb]

The Chief Secretary mentioned his constituents who go on holiday, but many of them go on packed easyJet flights on which the air passenger duty is great because every place is used. What we propose, however, is heavier taxes on half-empty planes that are producing relatively more emissions. We should base the tax on emissions, not on individuals. We can therefore secure additional revenue in a more environmentally effective way from air passenger duty and further revenue from taxing air freight—another environmental bag from which revenue can be derived. We also want a more progressive system of environmental taxation on larger cars. Taxes should be levied on people who choose to buy larger, less fuel-efficient cars. That amounts to about a third of the total tax package.

My current role is to write my party's manifesto for the next election and I have to tell the Chief Secretary that the criticism that the Liberal Democrat policy is not detailed enough is simply not one that I recognise. It is absolutely clear from what I have said that our package is a progressive one.

Let me say a few words about restricting pension tax relief to the standard rate, which the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), mentioned. To give him his due, in the midst of a rather banal run-through of the shadow Chancellor's four great p inciples, such as "tax changes should not be bad for the economy"—that must have taken a long time to write on the back of his envelope—the hon. Gentleman made some serious points about restricting the pension relief to the standard rate. He argued that that would somehow contribute to the pensions crisis. Excuse me, but it seems to me that the pensions crisis is not about higher rate taxpayers not saving enough—that is not where the pension saving gap is—but about women, part-timers and people on low and modest incomes who are not saving enough. How can restricting pension tax relief to the standard rate rather than the higher rate have any impact on the pensions crisis? There is simply no connection between the two. The pensions crisis relates to people on low and modest incomes not saving enough, but this tax change hits only the wealthiest. As the former shadow work and pensions spokesman, the hon. Gentleman will know that the very wealthiest gain disproportionately to a huge extent from pension tax relief.

Mr. Philip Hammond: Those comments are rather strange against a background of a record low savings ratio, but will the hon. Gentleman deal with the more substantive point that the idea of abolishing the higher rate pension tax relief is technically flawed?

Steve Webb: That point was raised by the Turner commission, but the hon. Gentleman has to accept the fact that pension tax relief must be allowed at some rate, so there is no reason why we should not set the rate at which it should be allowed. The whole system must be geared up to administer pension tax relief and we can set the rate at which it is allowed. If we set it lower than the higher rate, that has a simplification element: instead of different employees getting different rates of tax relief, they all get identical rates of tax relief.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is missing the point: at the moment, any contribution that an employer makes to a pension fund does not give rise to a tax charge for the benefit in kind for the employee. Under his proposals, some contributions would have to be attributed to higher-rate-paying employees, who would then suffer a tax charge.

Steve Webb: The point of our proposals is indeed to raise additional revenue from those who currently benefit from higher rate tax relief. That is not a problem; that is where we get the money from. Higher rate tax payers are benefiting disproportionately. The hon. Gentleman implied that that would damage pension saving. He and I, however, both get higher rate pension tax relief. Were we suddenly to get standard rate pension tax relief, does he think that we would do less pension saving? Surely that would not be the result. We are simply saying that a disproportionate amount of total pension tax relief goes to people such as him and me, and that source of revenue could be used to make the tax system as a whole fairer.

Mr. Hammond *rose—*

Steve Webb: Tempting though it is to give way to the hon. Gentleman, I have already given way to him twice. In addition, I know that the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Stewart Hosie) wants to speak.

Throughout the debate, there has been a suggestion that if we change anything people will flee the country, the City will tumble and we will lose money. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge is right: we do need to think about the dynamics. The second that we produce a costing based on an assumption about changed behaviour, however, we get ridiculed for making it up. The only figures available are those given to us by the Treasury, and those are based on a static assumption. If the Treasury gives us written answers based on its best guess of the change in behaviour, we will use them. It does not do that, however, so we must take the static assumption as the basis for our proposals, which are meticulously costed, as is characteristic of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable).

Throughout the debate, it has been assumed that we somehow have the optimal tax system, which has been arrived at through Finance Acts, evolution and the response to short-term political pressures. When the new Chancellor next changes the system, he will justify it on the grounds that he is moving to a new optimal system. Whenever the Government change the system, they tell us that they have realised that the previous system was not optimal and needs to be changed. All we are saying is that we have not got the balance right. Yes, we need to recognise the role of incentives. characteristically, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham was not talking about envy or having a problem with people who have high incomes; he was saying that the balance was not right. I would have thought that any progressive party would raise that issue. It falls to the Liberal Democrats, as the only progressive party left in the House, to raise the issue of the fairness of the overall tax system.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham said, wealth inequality has worsened in recent years. The Chief Secretary said proudly that the richest 1 per cent. pay 22 per cent. of tax, but that is a statement of

the blindingly obvious: they pay huge amounts of tax because they have huge amounts of income. The richest 1 per cent. are not just like the rest of us only a bit more so; they are totally different. They have completely different sources of income and wealth, and therefore need a particular tax regime. My hon. Friend has today put on the agenda some proposals that will make that system fairer at the margins. The Conservative Front-Bench spokesman suggested that the billions of pounds that we talk about in our costings are disproportionate, but they are marginal relative to the amount of tax paid. The total tax take is between £400 billion and £500 billion. We are talking about incremental changes. A £6 billion tax on the wealthy represents perhaps 1 per cent. of the total tax take. Such sums are not huge relative to the wealth of the people whom we are talking about.

I am tempted to go on, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I know that other Members are seeking to catch your eye. A debate of this sort is long overdue, and I am delighted that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have sought it today.

9.29 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): Before I deal with the Liberal Democrat motion, I want to say a word or two about the Chief Secretary's performance on the Government amendment. He spoke of growth over 59 quarters, tax credits and City competitiveness. The amendment refers to encouragement to save, and the Chief Secretary also mentioned jobs.

It is worth pointing out that those 59 quarters of unbroken economic growth did not take place in Scotland, where there have been a number of zero-growth quarters, a number in which growth has been negative, and a full-blown manufacturing recession on Labour's watch. As for tax credits, the Chief Secretary will be aware that the most recently published figures showed £5.5 billion of unclaimed tax credits that were due or liable to be claimed. The system has not been universally successful.

City competitiveness is not simply about the City of London; it is about the banking and finance sector more generally, and the 126,000 jobs in that sector in Scotland. The Chief Secretary will be aware—or if he is not, he should be—that the move in recent legislation to retain risk-based, principles-based, light-touch regulation was supported by all parties. As for encouragement to save, I believe that the savings ratio is half what it was in 1997; and as for jobs, more than 1 million manufacturing jobs have been lost since Labour came to power, 90,000 of them in Scotland. I am glad that the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern) is present. We have lost 1,100 jobs in our city in the last 12 months, mainly in manufacturing production and distribution, so the picture is not universally rosy.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that employment in Dundee is at an all-time high since records began. It is higher now than it has ever been.

Stewart Hosie: My point is that that is not a universal picture. I am entirely aware of employment levels: I can look at the statistics each month when they are published. I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that many of the jobs we have lost—long-term skilled, well-paid jobs in manufacturing production and distribution—cannot be automatically or simply replaced by some of the jobs we have brought into the city since.

The Liberal Democrat motion identifies a number of key concerns, including the growing wealth gap, and demands the publication of inequality data. It refers to

"wealthy individuals who are non-domiciled for tax purposes",

to stamp duty and inheritance tax, and so on and so forth. The trouble with many of the suggested solutions to some of those problems is that they are based on "Reducing the Burden", a document published recently and following on from "Fairer, Simpler, Greener", published in September last year. I am not convinced that that package will reduce the burden of taxation on low and middle-income households. Indeed, I suspect that the pension savings of low and middle-income earners will be reduced further, that their travel costs will rise, and that there will be no fundamental change in the impact of indirect taxation on the lowest quintile of earners compared to the highest.

The Liberal Democrats advanced a good many proposals in "Fairer, Simpler, Greener". They proposed to scrap the 10p starting rate, to reduce the 22 per cent. rate to 20 per cent., and to increase personal allowances. The 40 per cent. rate was intended to remain, but would apply only to earnings of £50,000 or more. The Government have announced many changes, some of which will not come into force until next year or 2009. We need to compare the "Fairer, Simpler, Greener" and "Reducing the Burden" proposals with the current allowances and tax levels. Although the amended Liberal Democrat policy would allow earners to retain a higher proportion of their income than higher earners, we believe that that would quickly be eaten up by the impact of "green" and other taxes that would be particularly detrimental for lower earners.

I mentioned pensions. This is an important point. The Liberal Democrats intend to apply tax relief on pension contributions at the lower rate of tax only, which would be reduced from 22 to 16 per cent. under their proposals. Although they are correct to point out that half the current pension tax relief goes to the top 10 per cent. of earners, they have no plans to reinvest those moneys in a better citizen's pension for everyone. They intend to use the £4.3 billion of savings or extra tax to fill the gaping hole that will appear in the public finances.

The Liberal Democrats propose a number of changes in environmental taxes, including the tax on vehicle excise duty, which a number of Members have mentioned. To increase VED on band E vehicles such as some Vectras and Mondeos from £150 to £850 would be disproportionate in terms of their fuel economy and CO_2 emissions. Further, it would put sensible and modest family cars such as the Renault Espace on the same level of taxation as a two-seater sports car such as a Mazda MX-5. I am unsure whether that is appropriate, and it would penalise people on low and middle incomes who need a family car.

On aviation, even without a tax on aviation fuel the current regime hits short flights more heavily than long-haul flights. As there are usually alternatives to short-haul flights, that might be fair; but there is no alternative on long-haul routes. However, the £3 billion

[Stewart Hosie]

in additional revenue that the Liberal Democrats want to take out of the industry will simply be passed on in higher ticket and cargo rates, and charges on freight flights might have an inflationary impact, which has not been discussed.

It is difficult to predict exactly how behaviour might change, but it is unlikely that the proposals will meet the desired environmental and fiscal objectives set out in the Liberal documents. Because of environmental change, it is highly unlikely that an extra £8.1 billion will be raised from environmental taxation—either that will be the case, or the Liberals anticipate that there will not be the behavioural change necessary to fill the gap in their figures.

I am pleased that the proposals on personal capital gains tax have gone. That would have been entirely disproportionate, and very punitive to people who have saved modest amounts of capital, perhaps in shares or share options given as bonuses, or in shares purchased through already taxed income over a lifetime of work. However, I am unsure that removing the taper relief on corporate capital gains tax will be without consequences either. People might choose to hold on to assets which they otherwise might have made liquid at an earlier stage, and that in turn might have a detrimental impact on investment—particularly cash investments.

There will be no lessening in inequality in terms of indirect taxation. At present, the lowest quintile pays 26.5 per cent. of their income in indirect taxation compared with 14.1 per cent. for those at the top, and we are not convinced that the Liberal Democrats' proposals will produce any significant change. They have mentioned that they intend to fill some of the gap through a general anti-avoidance rule, but there is not a huge amount of clarity on that, and certainly in the most recent document there were no numbers on what that GAAR would bring in.

Our assessment in terms of the revenue yield is that £4.1 billion would be lost from ending the 10 per cent. rate, £5.1 billion would be lost from raising the national insurance contributions threshold, £6.7 billion from cutting the basic rate to 20 per cent.—and an extra £10 billion from reducing it to 16 per cent.—£5.4 billion from increasing the upper rate threshold and another £1.6 billion from cutting corporation tax by 1 per cent. The cost would be some £22 billion, or £32 billion if the 16 per cent. basic rate were introduced.

In terms of the revenues to compensate, I do not believe that capital gains tax will bring in the yield the Liberals suggest. Even if it doubled, it would produce a gain of only an extra £3.8 billion. There would be a gain in terms of the single rate pension contribution relief of £4.3 billion, but not one penny of that would be spent on providing a decent citizen's pension for everybody. There would also be a £1.4 billion gain from corporation tax relief changes. In terms of environmental taxes, the Liberal Democrats were not optimistic but downright heroic in their assumption of gaining more than £8 billion. I think that it would be closer to half of that because of behavioural change. There would be a £4.2 billion gain from increasing the national insurance upper earnings to £50,000. Therefore, there would be a total gain of £17 billion to 18 billion, which would leave a shortfall of some £15 billion.

Steve Webb: The Government have already done what the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Stewart Hosie: The hon. Gentleman says that the Government have done those things, but many of them will not kick in until next year or 2009, so they have not done them all.

In addition, according to page 8 of "Reducing the Burden" there will be a

"substantial increase in the starting threshold"

for inheritance tax. The Liberal Democrats also intend to have a reform of stamp duty land tax. They say that they will pay for this through a general anti-avoidance regime which will

"strike out the tax benefit where the avoidance of tax is the main reason for a transaction."

However, that is very subjective, there is very little detail and there are no costings.

9.39 pm

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): I want to make one thing clear at the outset—the language in the title of our motion. Our original title was "Taxation of the Super-Rich" and we had no problem with that wording; it was the Table Office that had the problem. There has been no stepping back on our part, or fear about using such words.

Members have been much exercised about whether our proposals add up, but as we have said on many occasions, our analysis was informed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and we are basing our numbers on Government figures provided by the Treasury, so if the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) or the Chief Secretary has a problem with the figures they should ask the Treasury where it may have gone wrong.

The reason our proposals are evolving is that, unlike the Conservative party, we actually produce policy proposals, so they occasionally need to be adapted to respond to Government decisions; for example, after their flattering imitation of our policies, such as adopting our proposal for a 2p cut in the basic rate of taxation. That necessarily causes us to reconsider our proposals. That is the premise on which we proceed.

It is fascinating to see so much interest in our suggestions. Our proposals last week related only to taxpayers, but there are of course wider poverty issues and I am sure the Chief Secretary and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge will be pleased to learn that they have another policy paper to look forward to this week when we publish our document on poverty and inequality. They can look forward to another weekend poring over Lib Dem policy documents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) said, lack of policy is not one of our party's problems.

The hon. Member for Dundee, East (Stewart Hosie) made an interesting comment about the differing regional impacts of the economic record set out by the Chief Secretary. In my constituency, child poverty is still a problem, not necessarily because of the tax and benefit system but because of other structural problems, such as high water bills. Until those wider structural problems are tackled there will continue to

be hot spots. I have no doubt of the Prime Minister's sincerity about tackling such issues, but the problems will continue unless the structural issues are dealt with. Tax credits are a classic example. The intention was clearly honourable, but I have yet to hold an advice surgery without hearing from someone about a tax credit problem.

Those wider tax credit problems interact with the tax proposals that the then Chancellor made in his last Budget—to cut the basic rate of income tax by 2p and abolish the starting rate—because many people do not qualify for tax credits. The problem is not just that people do not claim, but people without children do not benefit as much and the under-25s are not entitled to claim working tax credit, where take-up is already poor. We need to make sure that the fairness the Government hope to promote actually comes about.

I planned to talk about the Lib Dem proposals, which Members on both sides of the House spent a lot of time discussing, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon for going into considerable detail about exactly where the money would come from. He made the important point that we should look at the overall balance of the taxation system.

Mr. Philip Hammond: The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) has already made it clear that the reason the Liberal Democrats looked at a static model is that those were the only figures available. They have balanced the books on a static model analysis, but do they recognise that the dynamic effects—the behavioural changes—will significantly reduce the amount of Exchequer receipts from the proposed changes?

Julia Goldsworthy: The hon. Gentleman is right, but the change in behaviour will work in both directions, which I wanted to address in terms of the comment of the hon. Member for Dundee, East. He said that the environmental taxes will not bring in as much revenue as we are suggesting because behaviour will change. We very much hope that behaviour will change, but at present we are trying to deal with an exponential increase in emissions. We want to slow that increase. I should be pleasantly surprised if emissions started to fall immediately, but our whole aim at this stage is simply to reduce the increase because it has been rising so quickly.

I welcomed the tone of the comments of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge when he referred to his sympathy for the underlying concerns of the motion, but unfortunately he said nothing of what he felt about those underlying problems or about any Conservative proposals to deal with them. It is interesting that so much effort was expended on looking at our proposals when, clearly, the Conservatives have no proposals of their own. Rather than having giant holes in their policy, they have no policy at all.

Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): It might have escaped my hon. Friend's attention, but the Conservative party does have one concrete proposal: significantly to increase the price of a pint of beer. Does she think that that will go down well with our constituents?

Julia Goldsworthy: I am not sure what income groups that would impact most heavily on. Other policy ideas have been floated in relation to the taxation of private equity, but although the Conservatives might have had a policy for a week or two, that has now taken the form of yet another review group.

On another point about behavioural change, we have been deliberately very conservative about the revenue that we think our changes will bring in. The example that we give is our aspiration to raise the inheritance tax threshold by changing the length of time that is required before people qualify as having made a lifetime gift that is exempt from inheritance tax. We have not included that costing in our proposals, because we are not clear about the dynamic impact that that would have or how long it would take to kick in.

Mr. Philip Hammond: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Julia Goldsworthy: I have only a few minutes left and I want to say a bit more.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury—I welcome him to his post—spoke at the outset about the amount of tax paid, rather than the proportion. We know that the poorest 20 per cent. of taxpayers pay more tax as a proportion of their income than the richest 20 per cent. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon made that point. The Chief Secretary said that tax is complicated, but that complication is part of the problem. The unfairness is being generated in part by the fact that the complication is such that loopholes can be exploited. Those on middle incomes probably do not even know that those loopholes exist. They struggle with the basics of the tax system, because they are complicated enough. In fact, this country has the most complicated tax system in the world. It has even surpassed India's tax system in terms of the number of pages of guidance.

The Chief Secretary spoke pejoratively of tax giveaways but, as has been said, the Liberal Democrats are trying to emphasise that there is a genuine need to look at the balance of where the burdens in the tax system lie. If he really thinks that tax giveaways are such a terrible thing, does he hope to persuade the new Chancellor to go back on the previous Chancellor's pledge to reduce the basic rate of income tax by 2p in the pound? The Chief Secretary also spoke of concerns about annual holidays being under threat. Let us not forget that the current Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor, increased air passenger duty. That is more regressive, because it was retrospective as well. We are proposing a tax on flights, which encourages them to be used more efficiently, and also takes freight into account.

As a veteran of the Finance Bill—with the exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), I think that I am only person present who served on the previous two Finance Bill Committees—I can say that we supported the Government on their anti-avoidance schemes and on sideways loss relief. I have fond memories of the debates on sideways loss relief, capital gains tax and stamp duty land tax avoidance measures. However, I hope that the Chief Secretary agrees that we need to go further.

[Julia Goldsworthy]

The Liberal Democrats have been talking about the need to make the tax system fairer. The Prime Minister, during the 10 years that he was Chancellor, used similar language. In his last Budget, he said that he wanted

"to reward work, to ensure working families are better off and to make the tax system fairer".—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 828.]

I cannot see the difference between a package of neutral proposals for a 4p cut in the rate of income tax and proposals for a 2p cut. Obviously, there is an issue about the amount, but the same groups of people would benefit. If a 2p cut benefits working families and makes the tax system fairer, surely a 4p cut would do exactly the same—but to twice the extent. We are trying to deal with issues such as inequalities of marketable wealth.

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham spoke in detail about issues such as inheritance tax, stamp duty land tax, and capital gains tax. There are real concerns in many areas. The avoidance of stamp duty land tax was mentioned. Not only does that have an impact on revenues—because special purpose vehicles are set up offshore—but it causes inflation in the housing market, particularly in London. Estate agents are talking about a secondary market at the very top end of the housing market in London—the very expensive end—where house price inflation is increasing massively because the houses are being bought by offshore companies, with no account taken of capital gains tax or stamp duty. We must look at the wider knock-on effects.

Listening to the debate, I asked myself what my constituents would think. They know what their personal burden of taxation is and that their council tax is increasing. Individuals in my constituency and across the country are struggling to afford a property, and when they do manage to buy one, they know that, with house prices increasing as they are, there is a very good chance that they will become liable for inheritance tax. Fear of inheritance tax is a massive concern for them. In contrast, there are some individuals who, provided that they can pay for the advice, minimise their tax contributions in a way that we do not feel is fair and balanced. We believe that there is a real need to reconsider such issues, even in relation to "non-doms".

We are more than happy to engage in a debate, but the Government need to give us the information that they are clearly holding and assessing first. That is what today's debate is all about. We do not think that there is anything wrong with the Government acknowledging the need to consider how balanced the tax system is. We have made our proposals. Unfortunately the Conservatives have not done the same. The Government have flattered us in the sincerest way by imitating our proposals from our last tax commission. I very much hope that the Chief Secretary will consider doing that again and look forward to seeing our proposals in next year's Budget.

9.51 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Kennedy): It is customary on these occasions to say that we have had an interesting debate and heard some interesting speeches, and I thank all those hon. Members who have spoken. The fairness of our taxation system is clearly an important topic. However, only one Liberal Democrat Back Bencher spoke in the debate—the hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb)—and he is Front Bencher most of the time. We had 45 minutes from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) in this debate, and those of us who were interested heard him speak for 45 minutes in the previous debate on corruption overseas. We have heard an hour and a half of talk from the hon. Gentleman—a whole football game of noise—but silence when we asked about his party's tax proposals. That is amazing.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made a hugely enjoyable speech, even when he was tweaking the Government's tail. Up until the last two or three minutes, I very much enjoyed his well argued demolition of the Liberal Democrats' proposals. I am grateful for his compliments, especially about our amendment, although he did make some criticisms, which I acknowledge. He regretted the lack of cool professional analysis from the Liberal Democrats, but I look forward to engaging with him in future when he brings forward the cool professional analysis that he demonstrated this evening.

We have increased the fairness of the tax system. The Liberal Democrats' motion talks about tax loopholes, but one of the ways in which we have increased fairness has been through targeted action to close loopholes and to tackle avoidance of income tax, national insurance, inheritance tax, capital gains tax and stamp duty land tax. We have also increased fairness by incentivising work through the national minimum wage and the working tax credits. I noted the comments made about tax credits, but that debate is for another time. By providing more support for those who need it most, especially families and pensioners, we have helped those who are at the most vulnerable end of the income spectrum. The introduction of child tax credit and pension credit in particular has helped us to cut both child and pensioner poverty, which increased under the previous Government.

I know that the Liberal Democrats' motion calls for the release of Office for National Statistics wealth inequality data since 2003, but it is HMRC, not the ONS, that is responsible for those data. Unfortunately, owing to data problems, the 2004 statistics were not released in October last year as scheduled; HMRC has subsequently been unable to obtain sound estimates and has therefore decided not to publish the data for 2004. That is clearly regrettable, but I am pleased to tell the House that the problem that affected the 2004 statistics has had no effect on statistics for later years and that the 2005 data will be published in October this year.

As a result of the economic success that the Government have delivered—let me remind the House that we have ensured low inflation, low interest rates, high employment, high gross domestic product and high and stable growth—there has been rising prosperity for all, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said. Household net wealth is higher than it has ever been. There are 1.8 million more home owners in Britain now than in 1997, and the average household is £1,000 a year better off because of our reforms to the tax and benefit systems.

The Government have delivered a successful economy and rising prosperity, and all of Britain will benefit from that.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that thousands had been let down by the tax credit system. We will debate that in detail on other occasions, but it needs to be put on record that the tax credit system supports 20 million people, including 6 million families and 10 million children. Take-up among families with an income of less than £10,000 is now at 97 per cent.; that is higher than the take-up for any other income-related financial support for in-work families. He also said that the savings ratio had slumped from 10 per cent. to 2.1 per cent., but that is not without a sting in the tail for him: a lower savings ratio is not surprising in a world with a stable economy and low unemployment. That is not how things were under the previous Administration.

We have taken a number of steps to extend savings and asset ownership, particularly on the part of those in most need of support; for example, we introduced the child trust fund, and replaced tax-exempt special savings accounts and personal equity plans with individual savings accounts. We need to ensure that we maintain that position, and that requires us to strike the right balance between fairness and competitiveness. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury spoke about the increased mobility of labour in the modern, globalised economy.

As usual, we are left with very little time to deal with the detailed points raised in this short debate. The Opposition motion refers to non-domiciled people; it would be easy to get the impression from some hon. Members who have spoken this evening that the country is full of non-domiciled people, none of whom pay any tax. In fact, we are talking about a relatively small number of people—about 112,000 of them, as my right hon. Friend said—who contribute about £3 billion in tax to the UK. None the less, as hon. Members will know, the rules on residence and domicile are under review. As Treasury Ministers have made clear on a number of occasions, and as I will reiterate tonight, any changes to the current system will need to be thoroughly thought through, and we will need carefully to balance the principles of ensuring fairness and promoting the UK's competitiveness. That is a balance that we have sought to strike throughout the tax system, and we will continue do so in future.

The hon. Member for Twickenham could not say that he would raise as much as a penny in extra taxes for his so-called reform of the residence and domicile rules. The motion suggests that the stamp duty land tax thresholds and inheritance tax nil-rate band should reflect house prices, but no previous Administration has ever linked tax thresholds to price movements of any one type of asset. The proposal could have perverse effects; for example, linking the inheritance tax nil-rate band to house prices could result in more estates paying the tax, if prices fell.

Tonight, we have heard a populist rallying call from the Liberal Democrats, aimed at tomorrow's newspapers and the by-elections in which they are competing. They think that everyone hates the wealthy, or the filthy rich, as they chose to call them. They think that that is a way to get votes, but I have to tell them that it is not the way to get the taxes in. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, last Friday the title of this debate was "Fair taxation of the super-rich". By this morning, it was "Fair taxation of the wealthy". If this debate had been tabled for Thursday, by Tuesday it would have been "Fair taxation of the middling". By Wednesday it would have been "Fair taxation of the ain't doing so well"—

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 55, Noes 288.

Division No. 185] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brooke, Annette
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Lorely
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Featherstone, Lynne
Foster, Mr. Don
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Holmes, Paul
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kramer, Susan
Lamb, Norman
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Moore, Mr. Michael
Mulholland, Greg
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Pugh, Dr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Webb, Steve
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Dan Rogerson and
Mr. Jeremy Browne

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Ba[illegible]h John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benton, Mr. Joe
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian

Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Patrick
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall, Mr. David
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCrea, Dr. William
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Price, Adam
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Siobhain McDonagh and Claire Ward

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 274, Noes 61.

Division No. 186] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Gordon

Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benton, Mr. Joe
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Drew, Mr. David
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, Mr. Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Patrick
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall, Mr. David
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Oliver, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Claire Ward and Siobhain McDonagh

NOES

Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brooke, Annette
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burstow, Mr. Paul

Burt, Lorely
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Davies, Mr. Dai
Featherstone, Lynne
Foster, Mr. Don
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Holmes, Paul
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, David
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kramer, Susan
Lamb, Norman
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
McCrea, Dr. William
Moore, Mr. Michael
Mulholland, Greg
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robertson, Angus
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wishart, Pete
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Dan Rogerson and
Mr. Jeremy Browne

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes that since 1997, the Government has undertaken a comprehensive programme of reform to the tax system, which has encouraged saving and rewarded enterprise, reduced child poverty, supported hard-working families and provided security for all in old age, and welcomes the fact that these reforms strike the right balance between encouraging enterprise and investment, maintaining the UK's international competitiveness and delivering a modern and fair tax system, in which all pay their fair share of tax.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Speaker: I propose to put together motions 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees),

PARTNERSHIPS

That the draft Limited Liability Partnerships (Amendment) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 6th June, be approved.

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft National Assembly for Wales (Legislative Competence) (Amendment of Schedule 7 to the Government of Wales Act 2006) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 7th June, be approved.

ANIMALS

That the draft Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 12th June, be approved.

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Community Order (Review by Specified Courts) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 14th June, be approved.—*[Mark Tami.]*

Question agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: We now come to motion 6 on Modernisation of the House.

Hon. Members: Object.

COMMITTEES

Mr. Speaker: With permission, I propose to put motions 7, 8 and 9 together.

Ordered,

HEALTH

That Mr Stewart Jackson be discharged from the Health Committee and Mr Lee Scott be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That Greg Clark be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Angela Browning be added.

TREASURY

That Mr Brooks Newmark and Mr David Gauke be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Mr Graham Brady and Mr Philip Dunne be added.—*[Tony Cunningham, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Gardens

10.26 pm

Mr. Nick Hurd (Ruislip-Northwood) (Con): I wish to present a petition on behalf of more than 1,800 residents of Ruislip-Northwood.

The petition declares:

Britain's gardens are under increasing threat of destruction arising from inappropriate and unpopular development with local opinion being disregarded and communities left powerless to prevent the infill of green spaces with the loss of precious biodiversity, the increased strain on infrastructure, notably with regard to parking and traffic flow, and the resulting change in the fundamental character of neighbourhoods against local wishes.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward legislation to give stronger protection to gardens in planning law and to allow elected local councillors to have greater discretion to protect local neighbourhoods.

And the Petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

MOD Stafford

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mark Tami.]*

10.27 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth) to his place on the Front Bench. I congratulate him on his new position as Minister for the Armed Forces. I am sure that he will do an excellent job and I can say to all members of our armed forces, wherever they are in the world, that they have a veritable Rottweiler in my right hon. Friend, who will be a tenacious defender of their interests and argue for them in the future.

The debate is about the future of MOD Stafford, which is a story of optimism, thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr. Ingram), my right hon. Friend's immediate predecessor. I express my sincere thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow for his work in securing the future of MOD Stafford. He was always ready to listen to my concerns. He was patient when I raged and encouraged me when I had half a decent idea. I am grateful to him for all his help and support.

Not long ago, the picture was different and the future looked bleak for the base. First, there was an announcement that approximately 450 uniformed personnel, who were based at the then RAF Stafford, would be relocated to RAF Wittering towards the east of the country. Shortly afterwards, the Ministry of Defence announced that all the storage and distribution operations at Stafford would be moved to Donnington and Bicester, threatening around 1,000 civilian jobs. Even the remaining RAF personnel, who were with Tactical Supply Wing, were caught up in a review of Joint Helicopter Command. It felt at that time as though we were spiralling downwards, towards total closure of the base, which would have ended more than 60 years of association between the military at that site and the town of Stafford.

Happily, however, we turned things around in Stafford. Most people in Stafford are extremely supportive of their military base. It is situated on the edge of the town and so has a physical closeness to local people, as well as emotional ties. It was therefore not difficult for me to energise the local community to defend our base. We formed a taskforce and we lobbied Ministers. I brought delegations to meet the former Minister for the Armed Forces in Whitehall. We argued for the base to be retained and for new uses to replace those that were to be lost.

Then we started to receive good news. We were pleased to learn that Tactical Supply Wing would remain at the Stafford base. It is important to point out how brave the people who work for Tactical Supply Wing really are. They are the people who fuel helicopters in all sorts of situations. If the helicopters are flying at the front line in great danger, Tactical Supply Wing is there with them, at the front line and in great danger, too. Tactical Supply Wing keeps helicopters flying to transport our troops for offensive operations. It keeps helicopters flying to rescue injured troops and bring them back to safety for treatment. All through the troubles in Northern Ireland, wherever Army helicopters flew there, Tactical Supply Wing was there fuelling them. I think that I am right in saying that Tactical Supply Wing has been the longest continuously active serving unit from this side of the Irish sea in Northern Ireland all through the troubles.

Then we persuaded the Army to take a look at the base at Stafford. As a result, we heard the hugely welcome news that the base would be the headquarters of 12 Signal Group and the home for a new 22nd signal regiment. As a result of that decision, around 700 new uniformed personnel have moved into the base in the 12 months since. That is very welcome to local people. Interestingly, the move to Stafford has included around 160 Gurkhas, who have proved immensely popular with local people. Most Gurkha soldiers have brought their families to Stafford, and we as a community are busy welcoming them to homes, jobs and schools in the town.

Among the civilian jobs that went with the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency were those of some engineers. There was great uncertainty about their future, but we recently received the good news that their jobs would mostly be saved, by folding their operations into those of the Army Base Repair Organisation. However, I still regret seeing so many good-quality civilian jobs being lost to our local economy, as the storage and distribution operations come to an end at the end of this year.

However, I pay tribute both to the Ministry of Defence's human resources officers and to our local jobcentre at Stafford for helping staff to make decisions on whether they wanted to transfer to other MOD operations or take early retirement, and for helping people to find new jobs as those at the Stafford base ended. Again, I thank and congratulate the former Minister for the Armed Forces. When I asked him whether the human resources people and our Jobcentre Plus office could work together and go into the base at an early stage to give good advice to people, he had the foresight to say yes. We have had a really smooth operation in helping people at a time that would have been very worrying for them.

Just in case there is any chance of a late change of opinion in the Ministry, bearing in mind the fact that new ministerial minds are operating there and that, for all I know, things are changing behind the scenes, I should like the new Minister for the Armed Forces to hear the four reasons why I say the wrong decision was taken on moving storage and distribution away from Stafford. The first reason is that the performance figures show that Stafford workers were among the most efficient anywhere within the entire Defence Storage and Distribution Agency.

The second of my reasons is that Stafford is such a central location for logistics. After all, that is why many private logistics companies choose the west midlands in general—as my right hon. Friend will appreciate, as a fellow west midlands MP—and Staffordshire in particular for their operations. For once, the Ministry of Defence was in the right place with logistics in Staffordshire, with its access to the communications network of motorways connecting it to the entire country.

The third reason is that Stafford has the only purpose-built, large-volume activity centre in the entire agency. So crucial is it to the fast moving of many

[Mr. David Kidney]

individual items of equipment and machinery that the Ministry of Defence is having to spend scarce resources recreating an alternative building at Donnington to replace the one that it will lose at Stafford. No one in the MOD can tell me what is going to happen to the storage and distribution activity centre—SADAC—at Stafford when it closes at the end of this year. I fear that it will stand empty, although it is perfectly good for use, while the new one at Donnington eats up scarce resources to replace it.

The fourth issue is one of recruitment and retention. As it is a more northerly location, Stafford has lower housing and labour costs compared with some of the alternatives in the south, and a willing and available work force on the doorstep of the base. There were good reasons, and there still are today, for retaining it, and I hope that something can be rescued.

Now that the future of the base has been secured, I want to start where any forward-thinking organisation would start: with our youth. Stafford has really good cadet forces for the Army, the air and the sea, and MOD Stafford provides a good home for the Army and Air Cadets. I am happy to confirm that I visit them regularly. I find really enthusiastic young minds and bodies willing to learn new skills, to attempt to gain new qualifications and to gain good discipline—both self-discipline and the discipline that comes from working with a team—from the work that they do in the cadets at MOD Stafford. I feel strongly that we should work hard to involve more young people in cadet forces, where they can learn skills that will stay with them for life. They will be able to have a crack at gaining valuable qualifications, including Duke of Edinburgh awards, and some choose careers in the services as a result of positive experiences in the cadets.

While I am on the subject of youth, I want to draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister a decision that was recently taken by Defence Estates—I know that he will not be able to respond to this tonight—in answer to my asking whether a local brass and drum marching band, Stafford Lancers, might have access to the MOD Stafford site for its playing and marching practice. They are very noisy people when they practise, and when they do so at local schools, some residents are not very happy about it. These youngsters, some of whom have been working with Stafford Lancers for more than a dozen years, might otherwise have no activities to engage in during their leisure time, and some might come from deprived backgrounds, but in Stafford Lancers they learn new skills and get the satisfaction of achievement. They have also been winning national and regional awards for years. It is a pity, therefore, that Defence Estates has recently concluded that it cannot provide them with the necessary space for their practice at Stafford.

I turn to the subject of our Territorial Army. Stafford lost its only training base for the TA as a result of the strategic review in 1998, when the drill hall at Kitchener house in Lammascote road was closed and subsequently sold. Our TA involvement in Stafford finished as a result, even though there are valuable TA contingents located around the county of Staffordshire and neighbouring ones in Wolverhampton and Telford. Will my right hon. Friend tell me whether he is thinking of bringing back regular TA training to MOD Stafford? Closer ties with the TA obviously help to support our regular forces, and having a training base at Stafford might help to attract more residents of the area to be part of the TA while still carrying out their work and studies locally.

On the regular armed forces, can we expect to see additional armed forces at MOD Stafford in the coming years? As more forces are relocated to the UK from Northern Ireland and later perhaps from Germany, places such as Stafford could offer them new bases. Does the Minister agree that the midlands as a whole could offer several options for accommodating returning members of the armed services? I would like to assure him that people in Stafford would welcome playing their part in bringing the troops back to homes in our region.

What of the MOD's plans for the so-called super-garrisons of the future? Will my right hon. Friend tell me about the latest developments and plans for them and whether it is within his consideration that one could perhaps be located at Stafford at some time in the future? What exactly are the plans for the future and what kind of timetable is being worked to presently? Stafford has always been very supportive when it comes to its military base, and the community benefits from it and appreciates its presence in our midst. If there were to be a super-garrison at the Stafford base, it would be useful for the Government to talk to the regional bodies responsible for planning, housing and infrastructure and for economic development. Clearly, such a major change in use would need careful planning.

I would like to advise my right hon. Friend that it would be useful to talk to Stafford borough council as soon as possible, because it is preparing its local development framework right now. I foresee that a larger base at Stafford would need more accommodation and I can see opportunities as the council develops its plans for housing for some of the military land to become valuable house building land of the future. I believe that the base could be reconfigured to give up some land for housing and to make use of either the money or building works in return for providing more forces accommodation on the remaining base. To do that, we really need to talk to the planners now; otherwise, the opportunity will be missed.

Generally, the base at Beaconside, Stafford has gone through many changes in recent years regarding both occupancy and resources, but it is now time to look forward once again with optimism and determination to the future. The base has been an integral part of Stafford's economy for more than 60 years, providing civilian jobs and services personnel who buy homes, find jobs for their spouses and partners, send their children to schools and shop locally. It is a busy place today with Army Signals, Tactical Supply Wing, Army Cadets, Air Training Corps, MOD police, the defence fire and rescue service and, of course, the supporting civilian staff. Sadly, we are losing civilian storage and distribution jobs, but the military presence helps offset at least some of those job losses. MOD Stafford now has security and the community is ready and willing to welcome further military uses.

Then there is the question of the name for the Army barracks. We had an interesting and full debate locally about the many possibilities. We have discussed famous battles of the past in which Stafford forces, such as the Staffordshire Regiment, have been involved. We have discussed famous generals of the past who were involved with the county; and we also considered former war leaders, such as Churchill. Personally, I think that we should go back to local ties. The reason why the area is called Beaconside is that it was the site of one of the national network of beacons that this country had centuries ago to warn against a possible invasion or threat. I believe that something like "Beacon barracks" or "Beaconside barracks" would be the best name for the barracks in future.

Talking of beacons, for centuries the country's network of beacons on high ground, such as Beacon hill on the edge of Stafford town, has been a symbol of our fortitude and resistance in the face of external threats to our security. Just as the beacons signalled readiness, resolution and reassurance, so in this modern age MOD Stafford and our other military bases around the country fulfil exactly the same role for all of us.

10.43 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on securing the debate and thank him for providing me with the opportunity to speak to him on this issue before this evening's debate. I should also like to pay tribute to his tireless efforts to ensure that his constituents' interests are fully represented as we go through the process of determining the future defence presence on the Stafford site and in the west midlands area more generally. Once again, he has set out his case cogently and well.

I also echo my hon. Friend's generous words about my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Mr. Ingram)—*[Interruption.]* There we are, it should sound like "Lesmahagal", as I am advised by Mr. Speaker! It seems that my predecessor dealt with my hon. Friend in the same way as he dealt with others—in an honest and straightforward manner, which was appreciated by most of those who met him.

My hon. Friend will recall that my predecessor outlined the position regarding what was known as RAF Stafford during an Adjournment debate in early 2006. I welcome the opportunity today to bring the House up to date on the current position.

The defence estate supports the provision of defence capability. That means that its usage must be kept under review to ensure that it is the right size and quality to meet future requirements. That constant process of review has had particular implications for the Stafford site in recent years.

As my hon. Friend is aware, the Stafford site's history is closely linked with the RAF. Following the departure of the RAF logistics units in early 2006, however, direct RAF interest in the Stafford site ceased. That left the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency and the Tactical Supply Wing, a joint helicopter command unit that supports deployed helicopter operations, as the primary users of the site.

As announced by the previous Secretary of State for Defence in July 2005, planned improvements in the way that we manage the defence supply chain mean that we can reduce our storage and distribution capacity, while saving money and becoming more effective. As part of those changes, the storage and distribution centre at Stafford will close at the end of the year. As my predecessor told my hon. Friend previously, there is no chance of revisiting or reversing that decision.

The centre is one of three storage and distribution centres that will close around the country by 2009. Given the consequences for staff, the decision to close the three centres was a difficult one, and we are committed to supporting those affected. An early release scheme has already been run across the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency as a whole, and staff who applied were offered early release by May 2007. At Stafford, a follow-up early release scheme commenced on 18 June 2007 for staff in the travel-to-work area. Through those measures, we are confident that there will be minimal redundancies as a result of the closure of the storage and distribution centre.

Another aspect of the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency's activities at the site is Stafford Engineering Wing—now renamed Engineering Services. The future of that function was determined in November 2006. Work not related to product storage, such as in-depth repair work, will remain at Stafford, with responsibility transferring to the Army Base Repair Organisation. Work related to product storage will transfer to Donnington with other Defence Storage and Distribution Agency functions.

The changes to Engineering Services take effect on 1 October 2007. We are fully engaged with the trade unions with the aim of minimising the impact on the individuals affected. Every effort is being made to minimise compulsory redundancies through a number of measures, including redeployment elsewhere in the Ministry of Defence and voluntary early release.

As my hon. Friend is aware, in parallel with the reductions in storage and distribution activity, we have been working towards establishing a permanent Army presence at Stafford. In April 2007, 22 Signal Regiment formed at Stafford, with the necessary infrastructure improvements completed on time. In February 2007, 248 Gurkha Signal Squadron and 222 Signal Squadron moved from their previous units to Stafford and began to settle in. 217 Signal Squadron is now formed and growing steadily, and, together with the support squadron, there are now some 450 soldiers in the regiment and some 200 Army families living in the Stafford and Donnington area.

The regiment has already deployed on operations and has supported a number of events in the borough. I am pleased to say that soldiers and their families have been made to feel very welcome by the local community. I believe that my hon. Friend will be at its official formation parade later this month. The regiment is expected to be more than 500 strong by the end of the year and, together with a small formation of station headquarters staff, Army recruiting teams and the Tactical Supply Wing, we will have more than 800 regular military personnel at the Stafford site.

To complete the current picture, Stafford also provides headquarters for 12 Signal Group, a Territorial Army Signal unit that carries out signals

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

training for the Army across the country, and there is also a cadet company headquarters at the site.

Looking ahead, we are examining a number of possible options that would result in the consolidation of the Army's presence at the site. There are plans for the relocation of other cadet units to Stafford, and we are considering the feasibility of making Stafford home to 35 Signal Regiment, a TA unit affiliated to 22 Signal Regiment. We are also considering Stafford as a temporary location for vehicle storage as facilities at Ashchurch are redeveloped. However, I am not in a position to confirm those moves today.

As my predecessor announced on 24 July last year, a study team is examining the long-term basing requirements for elements of the UK's Germany-based forces, particularly the headquarters of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, 1 Signal Brigade and 102 Logistic Brigade. Stafford is one of three sites being considered as potential bases for elements of 102 Logistic Brigade and 1 Signal Brigade who may return from Germany to the UK. Although a final decision on the future basing of HQ ARRC may be announced before the end of the year, we do not expect to be in a position to announce our final decision on the future basing of 1 Signal Brigade and 102 Logistic Brigade before next year at the earliest. Owing to the relative immaturity of our proposals, no discussions have yet been held with local authorities in any of the shortlisted locations for 1 Signal Brigade and 102 Logistic Brigade, but we hope to be in a position to start the process soon.

As for the long-term aspirations for Stafford, my hon. Friend is already aware that over the next 30 years the Army aspires to base its people in what, as he knows, are called super-garrisons. The Army is developing its policy in that regard, but the benefits might lead to a smaller number of larger sites, providing a better quality of life and more facilities for Army families. Progress on super-garrisons will depend upon a range of factors including the availability of resources, but there is no doubt that the west midlands is one of the areas with the potential to develop a super-garrison. Partly with that in mind, we currently have no intention of disposing of any land, at Stafford for housing or any other use, in order to retain that flexibility.

I assure my hon. Friend, as has my predecessor, that we understand the need to engage with all relevant Departments, regional bodies and local authorities as we develop our super-garrison proposals. Indeed, officials from Defence Estates are already engaged with the west midlands regional spatial strategy, and a marker will be placed for the possible development of a west midlands super-garrison demonstrating the MOD's intentions for the area.

My hon. Friend said that he would appreciate an update on the renaming of MOD Stafford. As he is aware, we have held informal discussions with various stakeholders, units, local dignitaries and the Stafford taskforce to find the right name. MOD Stafford is located in the Beaconside area, as he said, which is so-named because of its use for signalling beacons since Tudor times. Against that background, my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the name "Beacon barracks" emerged as the strong favourite, given that it has strong local connections and is also relevant to the Royal Signals. I am therefore delighted to announce that the barracks should now be known as Beacon barracks.

Mr. Kidney: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for signalling that future name for the base. I was not urging him to flog off pieces of land for housing, but rather to engage with the planners to defend the possibility of there being a reconfiguration of the site in the future that would enable some of the land to be used to create a capital receipt or a contractual obligation in order to get more accommodation built. It is the planning that now needs to be done, not the selling off of the land. May I also ask my right hon. Friend to write to me about the Stafford Lancers, which I mentioned?

Mr. Ainsworth: Yes, I will write to my hon. Friend on that second point. On the first point, I hope that he accepts that we must maintain flexibility if we are to be able to accommodate super-garrisons—if that is where we go. Such decisions cannot be taken at present. We will look at whether or not it is too early to engage with the local authority on planning, because I am told from within the Department that my hon. Friend is concerned that we seize any local opportunities.

Our requirements for land at Beacon barracks have changed, but our need for the estate has not. I can assure my hon. Friend that Beacon barracks feature very much in our plans for the future. We will continue to work closely with the local community and other interested parties as our plans mature.

Question put and agreed to

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 17 July 2007

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[Lords]*
Read the Third time, and passed, with amendments.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Employment (Former Mining Communities)

1. **Jeff Ennis** (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): What steps she proposes to take to improve transport services to enable better access to jobs for people in former mining communities. [149827]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Ms Rosie Winterton): Local transport authorities in former mining areas have made substantial investment to address local regeneration objectives, including enabling better access to jobs through new roads, improvements to public transport and facilities for walking and cycling.

Jeff Ennis: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her new position in the Government. Is she aware of the issue of access to jobs in the Dearne valley project, which is part funded by the housing market renewal programme? It is creating greater opportunities for access to jobs and services in the Dearne and South Yorkshire area in general. Does she agree that future housing development and housing regeneration projects have to go hand in hand with greater accessibility planning at their core?

Ms Winterton: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind welcome and I acknowledge his interest in the subject, which is extremely important for the South Yorkshire area. I read his speech at a conference in March, in which he set out the importance of transport to enable people to get to their jobs while also highlighting the importance of housing development. In preparing local transport plans, local authorities have to look, particularly now, at how disadvantaged people might get extra services and ensure that they plan public transport accordingly. That is exactly in line with what my hon. Friend said and it is particularly important for former mining areas like ours.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Corsham in my constituency is very much a mining community, having had 13 stone mines, most of which—bar one—have now been closed. Sadly, Dr. Beeching closed our railway station. That creates a problem for new development in the town, particularly by the Ministry of Defence, which is opening a £1 billion new centre in Corsham. We badly need a new station as so many people have to travel by car. Will the Minister join her predecessor in supporting our venture to have a new station in the town of Corsham?

Ms Winterton: I would be most interested to hear more about the plans for such a local station. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, in planning well in advance, it is important to look at the integration of transport. Where we have railway stations, we need to ensure that they fit in with local bus transport plans and people's driving habits, for example.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to her new role in the Government. I would like to raise the issue of interchangeability. We are lucky to have the Penistone line and the Denby Dale station, but unfortunately the trains tend to arrive and leave five minutes before and after the bus arrives, bringing people from Wakefield and Holmfirth. That is a critical issue for people trying to commute. We have had huge problems and the parish council has written to me about that and other bus services being taken away in my rural areas. Will my right hon. Friend look into this and try to get some sense and heads knocked together on the problem?

Ms Winterton: My hon. Friend is right. If we are to succeed in getting more people on to public transport, it is absolutely right to look at how we achieve proper integration. We want local authorities to look at all modes of travel, particularly through local transport plans, and to ensure that, if necessary, they sit down with the train companies and bus operators to put forward people's travel patterns. Frankly, it is to everyone's benefit if they can get that sort of planning right.

Coventry Airport

2. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): If she will make a statement on the future use of Coventry airport. [149828]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jim Fitzpatrick): The future use of Coventry airport is a commercial matter for the airport operator.

Mr. Robathan: I welcome the Minister to his new role—I am quite certain that he will enjoy it—and thank him for that rather opaque statement. May I press him further? Many of my constituents are very concerned by a perceived increase in the number of aircraft; they appear particularly to be flying over the Lutterworth area much more. Many others believe that an expansion of Coventry airport in an area of high population would be unwise. Should any plans to expand the airport come before him, would he please ensure that they go out for the maximum possible consultation?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am sure that I can give that assurance and I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind words. As he knows, Coventry airport serves a specialist role within the region with a mix of traffic. The 2003 air transport White Paper concluded that the airport could continue to perform that role "within existing constraints". In the light of our conclusions on capacity elsewhere in the midlands and potential surface access and environmental and airspace constraints, the White Paper did not envisage that any significant further development beyond the current level of passenger throughput would be appropriate.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). The situation relating to Leicester and Leicestershire has become much worse, and any expansion of Coventry will have a serious effect on the environment in my constituency. The best place in which to expand services is Birmingham airport. Will the Minister bear that in mind if he makes any decisions on the matter?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I can only repeat the assurances that I gave the hon. Member for Blaby about the proposals for Coventry and our view of capacity elsewhere in the midlands. The White Paper "The Future of Air Transport", published in 2003, sets out the strategic framework for the next 30 years. As my right hon. Friend knows, it aims to create a balance between the economic importance of aviation and environmental and other considerations.

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): The Secretary of State's recent decision not to permit the development of an extended passenger terminal at Coventry airport has been welcomed by many of my constituents who live very near the airport, but one of the difficulties experienced during the lengthy planning inquiry was that Warwick district council had to bear the financial burden of dealing with the matter, in competition with an airline company with extremely deep pockets. Will the Minister consider—in general terms—ways in which in we can help local authorities to deal with substantial planning inquiries of this kind?

Jim Fitzpatrick: That is a fair point, but when planning issues such as that arise, expenditure by local authorities is always necessary so that they can make representations. I can only tell the hon. Gentleman that the Department for Communities and Local Government always listens to representations made by any local authority in respect of the annual settlement—which, as he knows, has been growing over the past 10 years, and will doubtless continue to grow—and reassure him that his local authority's representations will be taken into account at the appropriate time.

Humber Bridge Board

3. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes) (Lab): When she last had discussions with the Humber bridge board. [149829]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Ms Rosie Winterton): Officials from my Department have had frequent and regular discussions with the Humber bridge board on a range of issues. The most recent discussions took place on 19 June, on the restructuring of the Humber bridge debt.

Shona McIsaac: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer, and welcome her to her new position. I appreciate that the debt has been restructured, but will she confirm that that means that the board will retain more money, which could potentially be invested in local transport initiatives such as concessions for people travelling to Hull hospitals for cancer treatment?

Ms Winterton: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work that she has done in this area, not least with the rather splendid Bill that she promoted some time ago.

It is for the Humber bridge board to decide what to do with the £16.5 million or so that is available following the debt restructuring. If the board wanted to offer concessionary fares we would certainly consider its proposals, but we would have to be assured that it could meet its financial obligations. My hon. Friend might like to consider whether local health authorities would be interested in working with the board to enable people to be transported to hospital.

Local Bus Services

4. **Mr. Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): What arrangements she plans to make to give local authorities a greater say over local bus services. [149830]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Ruth Kelly): The draft Local Transport Bill proposes changes that will give local authorities stronger levers to improve bus services and work in partnership with bus operators. That includes making bus franchising a realistic option in areas where it is in the public interest for local authorities to take greater control of bus services.

Mr. Mahmood: I welcome the Secretary of State to her new role. Will the draft Bill allow local councillors to determine local routes for their constituents to provide the better service that is needed in local areas?

Ruth Kelly: I can give my hon. Friend a firm assurance that that will be the case. It might be made possible in a number of ways, including a voluntary partnership between a local authority and a bus operator. If the authority so chose, the arrangement could be put on a statutory basis. Alternatively, quality contracts—a form of bus franchising—would enable local authorities to have much more control over bus services. Behind all that is the idea that passengers must come first, and that local authorities must seek the powers that they need in order to ensure that passengers receive the best possible service.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): In investigating the furtherance of bus travel, will the Secretary of State revisit the effect on rural transport of limiting the length of bus journeys? Many rural passengers nowadays have to interrupt their journeys and change unnecessarily because of the new regulations on the length of a bus journey before drivers and buses must be changed.

Ruth Kelly: I certainly will do that. The powers we propose under the draft Local Transport Bill will enable local authorities to do as they see fit by working with the bus operator companies to put in place not only

routes but frequencies and to determine punctuality and potentially the fares charged. Those powers will go a long way towards making sure that passengers get the facilities that they need. Also, community transport in rural areas will become more viable as it is made easier for there to be buses of different sizes and for drivers to be hired to operate them.

Ms Angela C. Smith (Sheffield, Hillsborough) (Lab): I think that all Labour Members welcome the Bill's inclusion in the draft legislative programme, but will my right hon. Friend address concerns that the process set out in the Bill for franchising bus services is too long, especially given the falling levels of bus patronage in metropolitan areas?

Ruth Kelly: I understand that that is a concern, particularly in Sheffield. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State will travel to Sheffield to meet people and discuss their concerns. However, I hope that my hon. Friend realises—as the local authority in Sheffield does—that our proposals will lead to the biggest shake-up in bus services for 20 years and that we are lowering the hurdle by making it much easier for local authorities to take the powers they need. I know that Sheffield is already working towards having a quality contract. We must make going down that route as easy as possible. Under the proposals, we envisage that there will be a timetable of about 14 to 20 months for a quality contract to be assured, which is similar to the length of time that a local authority would usually in any event want to spend making sure that it had got its proposals right. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State will be delighted to discuss the proposals not only with my hon. Friend but with the local authority.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the draft Bill include a proposal for a separate traffic commissioner for Wales so that we can finally end the anomaly of the regulation of bus services in Wales being based in Birmingham? Although it is a splendid city in every respect, it is hardly an appropriate vantage point from which to make decisions on transport in Wales.

Ruth Kelly: I hear the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for the return of powers to Wales, but the important point to make is that traffic commissioners must have the powers that they need to hold both bus operators and local authorities to account—and the Welsh Assembly thereto, where appropriate—in order to make sure that buses run on time and serve people well. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we will propose reforms to the traffic commissioner body. He will have to wait for the consultation exercise to be published, but I hear what he says on this matter.

Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley) (Lab): The Confederation of Passenger Transport UK has boasted that it has more influence on bus policy than MPs or local government, and we know from today's edition of *The Times* that it has influence in the other place. Will my right hon. Friend check the 4,000 passes to the Department for Transport and assure me that the CPT and its members do not have undue influence in that Department?

Ruth Kelly: I would be delighted to speak to my hon. Friend and any other Member who has concerns about bus policy or its operation at local authority or city level. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State is travelling not only to Sheffield but around the country to meet people who have particular concerns, and I am sure that she would be happy to discuss such matters with my hon. Friend.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her new Government post. If we are to accept the concept of road pricing, those areas making bids to the transport innovation fund must offer better co-ordination and planning of the bus network. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give that, if Manchester's bid proceeds, the Greater Manchester passenger transport executive will have the powers it needs?

Ruth Kelly: Of course, I will have to look at the bid from Greater Manchester when it comes to my Department for examination, but the principle is that if a local authority or a city wants to pursue road pricing, it is right that the public services, and public transport in particular, work well and in an integrated fashion. Local authorities must have the powers that they need, especially over buses, to make that possible and they must also have the funding to put in place transport that works to serve the needs of the local population.

Birmingham New Street

5. **Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): What progress has been made in reducing train congestion at Birmingham New Street station. [149831]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Ruth Kelly): Network Rail and Birmingham city council have been developing a scheme for the redevelopment of the station. My Department is assessing whether it addresses future needs and represents value for money.

Mark Williams: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that response. She will be aware that Arriva Trains Wales, which links mid and west Wales and Shropshire with Birmingham, has frequently had to terminate services at Wolverhampton because of lack of platform capacity at Birmingham New Street station. In view of what she has said about the discussions between Birmingham city council and Network Rail, can she confirm whether platform capacity, as opposed to the necessary improvement of surroundings, will be a part of the discussions? There is a great need for that, because many of my constituents think that they receive a lamentable service.

Ruth Kelly: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I know that there have been reliability problems with the Arriva Trains Wales service and I urge him to take up those concerns with the Welsh Assembly Government, because ultimately the Aberystwyth line is their responsibility. He mentions capacity at Birmingham New Street station, and that is an issue with which I am familiar. Clearly, capacity will be one of the major priorities of the forthcoming rail White Paper and, given the central importance of Birmingham New Street to the rail network, it will clearly be one of the issues in my mind as I go forward.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I also welcome my right hon. Friend to her new post. From the fact that this question comes from outside Birmingham, she will be aware of the importance of the regeneration of New Street station nationally and not simply to the city of Birmingham and the west midlands. She mentioned discussions: does she need any further information from any of the partners involved to convince her just how vital that project is to the country as well as to the region?

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I know that he, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) and others in the region have been championing the cause of New Street station, not just in terms of passenger capacity, which is clearly needed, but because of the regeneration potential of the plans. My Department has been liaising with Birmingham city council and challenging it to come up with plans that represent clear value for money.

We are currently in a process of iteration, and the local council still has significant work to do to prove its case. I can pledge to my hon. Friend that I will give the issue my close attention and focus especially on the value for money case, while understanding that value for money will include any potential regeneration benefits.

Mr. Speaker: Mr. Philip Hammond.

Hon. Members: Stephen.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Lady to her new role and wish her success in curing the nation's transport problems. Seven years ago, in the 10-year plan, the Government promised to tackle the very bottlenecks that she has been talking about, but they persist. The real progress in reducing train congestion and increasing capacity at New Street will be secured by the £500 million station upgrade that we all expected to hear in the high level output statement, which was expected yesterday. Was the HLOS delayed because of the emerging crisis in the Underground public-private partnership or the embarrassment caused to the Government by First Great Western and TravelWatch's performance review at the weekend? When will the Government announce something to help west midlands commuters—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is entitled only to one supplementary question, even if I get his name wrong.

Ruth Kelly: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post and I congratulate him on his creative efforts in his questioning. I am sorry that they were not more successful. He is right to say that we have to think about Birmingham New Street station and the capacity issues. I understand that the issues include pedestrian access as well as rail connections outside the station.

One thing that I have not mentioned to colleagues so far is that the recent award of the Cross Country franchise will, I hope, make a significant difference to reliability across the whole network, including at Birmingham New Street station. If trains on that franchise are able to run on time and carry more passengers, that will also help all other trains leaving and arriving at that station.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): I should like to welcome my right hon. Friend to her new post, and I am glad that she is aware of the congestion problems in the west midlands, especially at New Street. The proposed redevelopment, whenever it takes place, will not help that problem, so will she speak to the rail operators with a view to taking some of the congestion away from the station? Tamworth is the crossroads between the main lines to the west coast and the north-east. Will she consider making it a hub station, as that would reduce people's need to go into New Street during the reconstruction period?

Ruth Kelly: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that I plan to meet the train operating companies next week, when we will discuss their plans to tackle capacity problems at stations around the country. It has been made plain already that many passengers are forced to change at Birmingham New Street station, and that different options are needed. One of the merits of the recent award of the Cross Country franchise will be that fewer passengers will be forced to change at New Street station, but we keep such matters under constant review and they will inform the contents of the rail White Paper to be published shortly.

Rail Fare Regulation

6. **Sandra Gidley** (Romsey) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with South West Trains on the regulation of rail fares. [149832]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Tom Harris): There have been no discussions about either the scope or the level of fares regulation. There has been some discussion about the forthcoming investment in modern smartcard ticketing, which may require fares regulation procedures to be changed.

Sandra Gidley: In May this year, South West Trains hiked up prices by 20 per cent. for passengers from Winchester and Southampton who arrive in London between 10 am and 12. No such increases were introduced for people travelling from Basingstoke and Reading, where there is competition from First Great Western. What can the Minister do to prevent companies such as South West Trains from fleecing passengers on routes where there is a monopoly franchise?

Mr. Harris: I of course sympathise with those who find that their fares have gone up by a significant amount. I am sure that the hon. Lady will understand that the Government can intervene in such matters only by extending the scope of regulation. However, there would inevitably be a cost to the public purse, at a time when many more demands are being made on it, both in the rail industry and elsewhere.

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): I welcome the Minister to his post, not least because he provides an element of gender balance in a Department that is becoming very much a female province in this House. The hike in fares to which my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) referred is not unique to South West Trains, but it runs contrary to the original

plan that the Association of Train Operating Companies would try to attract more passengers by providing a range of options for off-peak travel. Will he therefore consider looking at the model recently adopted by Transport for London? It has decided to take the revenue risk involved in running the north London line franchise, in order to get much more integrated travel and to achieve the goal of getting people to transfer from road to rail, rather than from rail to road.

Mr. Harris: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new post and point out that, having been there for 10 months, I am now the veteran Minister in the Department for Transport. The price of a regulated fare in Britain is now 2 per cent. lower in real terms than it was 10 years ago. As for innovative ways to get people on to trains, she will be aware that South West Trains has instituted the so-called Megatrain fares scheme that enables people to buy tickets at very low prices. I do not believe that we should change the current structure of the franchising system: there has been enough change in the industry over the past 10 or 15 years, and the system is delivering for passengers.

Mrs. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the whole ministerial team to their roles. Will the Minister tell us what representations he received from South West Trains about the impact on fares when the DFT set the franchise premium payments up to 2014? Has he made any estimation of how much fares will have to increase to fund the increased premium payments set by his Department?

Mr. Harris: In welcoming the hon. Lady to her new position as shadow Transport Secretary, I express the hope that she will not go down the cul-de-sac pursued by her predecessor in suggesting that as long as there is a public subsidy to train operating companies all is well and good but that we should never allow a premium to be paid by train operating companies back to the public purse. South West Trains made the Department aware that some off-peak, unregulated fares would have a higher than inflation increase, but even if the company had not told us that, the fact is that as the fares are unregulated we would not be in a position to change its mind. Unregulated fares do exactly what it says on the tin.

Mrs. Villiers: Is not the reality that the Minister and his Department are responsible for ratcheting up fares because of the ever-increasing premium payments they demand from train operating companies? South West Trains will be paying almost £250 million a year in premium payments by 2014. In total, the five highest value franchises will be paying well over £1 billion in premium payments by 2014—a more than tenfold increase. Is not the Secretary of State using the franchise system to price people off the railways to deal with the overcrowding problems that the Government have wholly failed to tackle?

Mr. Harris: The hon. Lady has clearly decided at an early stage to ignore my advice. However, as I told her predecessor, the Department for Transport at no point specifies any level of premium, or indeed any level of subsidy. If the hon. Lady is to stay in her post for any length of time, it may help her to become slightly more informed about the franchising process. I and my officials would be more than happy to meet her and talk her all the way through the process from the early points, so that she can understand exactly how a franchise is let.

Road Infrastructure (North-West)

7. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): If she will make it a departmental priority to improve the road infrastructure in the north-west. [149833]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Ms Rosie Winterton): The north-west will receive £345 million over the next three years for local authority road and public transport projects and Highways Agency major schemes. We will continue to take advice from the region on how investment should be prioritised.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: Is the Minister aware that the letter from the previous Under-Secretary in her Department to me and others relating to the south-east Manchester multi-modal recommendation has created immense anger among all local authorities—Labour, Liberal and Conservative—in Cheshire, Macclesfield and Greater Manchester? It really is about time that areas such as Cheshire and Macclesfield, as well as Greater Manchester, had a fairer distribution of money for road improvements up to 2022. Will the Minister receive a delegation from me, including Members from all parties, to discuss the matter?

Ms Winterton: I have read the letter that the Under-Secretary sent to Members of Parliament in which the offer was made that a meeting would be arranged with local councils and Department for Transport officials. I believe that meeting will be on 23 July. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) has already approached me about meeting a delegation of MPs and I am more than happy to do so, but I suggest that we wait until after the meeting on Monday, in order to see what is resolved there.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to her new job, and I very much welcome the offer she has made to meet all Members of Parliament with an interest in the SEMMS relief road. Will she consider all the options for progressing the road, which is vital to relieving congestion on the A6 in my constituency, including building part or all of it as a toll road?

Ms Rosie Winterton: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are certainly committed to working in close collaboration with the local authorities to look at all the possible funding options. As I said, when the meeting on Monday has taken place, we should sit down and look at the various proposals. I understand her point about toll roads. I hope that we will be able to take this matter forward. As I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members are aware, the cost of the scheme has escalated—looking at some of the funding options—up to £1 billion. We have to recognise that we need to explore the different options very closely.

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): Is the Minister aware that the recommendations by the regional authorities have caused my constituents great anger? They mean that we have very little infrastructure investment in county roads such as the A34, which runs from Manchester and is a major commuter road south through Congleton to Stoke-on-Trent. When the long-overdue Alderley Edge bypass is completed, that will merely decant vast amounts of traffic into areas in and around the town of Congleton. When are we going to get a bypass, and when will some money be spent in rural areas, rather than just in the large metropolitan areas?

Ms Rosie Winterton: It is important to recognise that the north-west region has a 10-year regional funding allocation of £1.245 billion, and that local transport funding has doubled in the past seven years. However, it is also important to recognise that the Department takes advice from the region about the region's priorities, which is the right approach. We will continue discussions, but it is important to remember that that is the principle on which we work.

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the north-west has enjoyed unprecedented growth over the past 10 years, yet still lags behind the national average. One of the reasons for that is our poor road infrastructure. May I invite the Minister to meet the Northwest Development Agency and see all the plans that we have in the north-west, and—I hope—put some more money into our infrastructure, so that we can have economic growth at the same level as the rest of the country?

Ms Rosie Winterton: My hon. Friend is right to say that transport infrastructure is an important part of economic growth, particularly at the regional level. I thank him for his kind invitation. I would be more than happy to meet him, and perhaps the regional development agency, to discuss some of the issues that are clearly of such great interest to Members.

Road Safety

8. **Paul Flynn** (Newport, West) (Lab): What plans she has for measures to reduce the number and severity of injuries arising from collisions between vehicles and pedestrians. [149834]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jim Fitzpatrick): The Government, local authorities and road safety organisations are working to reduce pedestrian casualties through education, engineering and enforcement. From October 2005, passenger cars and light vans are required to provide protection for pedestrians in their design. This is the first legislation of its kind. A second stage of requirements will apply from 2010.

Paul Flynn: The Government are to be congratulated on their part in the recent ban on the manufacture and sale of bull bars—what the Americans call killer grilles—the macho fashion accessories that concentrate and multiply the force of an accident at the level of a child's head and vital organs. However, being a pedestrian is still twice as dangerous as travelling in a car. Have the Government any more plans to restrict the use of very heavy vehicles, particularly those with non-flexible fronts?

Jim Fitzpatrick: May I return the compliment and congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaigning he has done on this issue over a considerable time? The Government are serious about improving the safety of pedestrians and we made a significant contribution to the development of the European legislation that he mentioned, including the personal protection directive of 2003, the frontal protection systems directive of 2005, and the second phase of the personal protection directive of 2003, which will be introduced in 2010. My hon. Friend has contributed to ensuring that from 25 May 2007, new vehicles have had to be fitted with a frontal protection system approved under the directive, and that from the same date, any frontal protection system offered for sale as an accessory must be approved and carry an approval mark. We will continue to monitor these issues.

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): Does the Minister agree that one of the most effective ways of reducing the number and severity of injuries is to reduce the default speed limit on lit urban roads to 20 mph?

Jim Fitzpatrick: That is an issue for local authorities to decide. We have given them the power to introduce reduced speed limits in areas where that is appropriate. The hon. Gentleman is well aware that the Government set out their road safety strategy in 2000 and indicated their targets for reducing the number of people killed and seriously injured by 2010, so it is lower than the average figures for 1994 to 1998. We are well on our way to meeting those targets, but we should not be complacent, because there are some differences in scale. We need to make sure that we press for a reduction in that number, and the speed restrictions that the hon. Gentleman requests can certainly play a part in our campaign.

Port Security

9. **Patrick Mercer** (Newark) (Con): What steps she has taken to improve port security. [149835]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Ruth Kelly): My Department works with the ports industry in implementing the international ship and port facility security code, which came into force in 2004. The code introduced new requirements, under which port facilities and ships must work to security plans, which set out the response measures that are to be taken in normal, heightened and exceptional security situations.

Patrick Mercer: I am very interested in the right hon. Lady's response. Over the past few years, I have made it my business to visit a number of ports and consider their security. When I went to the extremely vulnerable port of Holyhead, I was particularly surprised to find that there were no Border and Immigration Agency or customs and excise officers present, and special branch officers were having to deputise for both. Why was that?

Ruth Kelly: I pay tribute to the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on this subject. I know that he is interested not just in port security, but in the security of our borders more generally, and it is right for me to

acknowledge that work in the House. I hope that he will acknowledge that since 2004 security at ports has improved significantly. We monitor security at ports, but they are also independently audited by the EU. Since its last audit, it has said that results have been positive. However, if the hon. Gentleman says that it was not evident what was being done at a particular port, I will take it upon myself to go and examine the situation, or to make sure that it is examined. I will report back to him in writing with my findings.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Is it not time that this country unified not only Customs and Excise, but the police forces responsible for aviation and those responsible for ports, and created a proper security system, capable of resisting the real threats posed to this country by terrorism?

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. It is absolutely right that we work together across Government to protect our borders in the most effective way possible. She will have followed closely the latest reorganisation of the Home Office, which means that it can concentrate on counter-terrorism. My Department, which has responsibility for transport, co-operates extremely closely with Home Office officials. On the front line, under the border management programme, we are making sure that the police, the Border and Immigration Agency, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and UKvisas work together to share information appropriately, and take action in specific locations as required. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that that is a serious step forward in making sure that our borders are secure, because protecting our citizens must be one of the most fundamental duties of any Government.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): The Government are in denial on that point, and the hon. Member for Newark (Patrick Mercer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) are absolutely correct. Is Project Cyclamen now working in all our container ports 24 hours a day? If not, why not?

Ruth Kelly: I have already set out how the security of our ports is enforced and audited, and the results are broadly positive. Clearly, the extent of the security measures taken at any port will depend on the threat level, and it will be determined accordingly—

Andrew Mackinlay: Cyclamen?

Ruth Kelly: As my hon. Friend has particularly mentioned Project Cyclamen, I will establish what the state of play is on that.

Andrew Mackinlay: And will my right hon. Friend come back to the House with that?

Ruth Kelly: I will write to my hon. Friend about it.

Andrew Mackinlay: No, no, come back to the House.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was asked—

Social Exclusion (Adults)

19. **Mr. Jim Devine** (Livingston) (Lab): What plans he has to tackle severe social exclusion among adults. [149812]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Edward Miliband): Since 1997 social exclusion has fallen, but we need to do more, so we plan to tackle it through a focus on particular groups of people, such as ex-prisoners and those with mental health problems. Just as through "Every child matters" we have seen better local co-ordination for children's services, so too through our work we will seek better local co-ordination for adults to tackle people's multiple and complex needs.

Mr. Devine: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, and I welcome him to his new Department and his well-deserved promotion. As he knows, I worked in psychiatry, and people with mental illness are extremely difficult to place in the workplace, not least because of the prejudice of some employers. Can he reassure me that he will co-ordinate work through all Government agencies and the CBI to ensure that we get those people back in the workplace, which is not only good for their self-esteem, but is therapeutic, too?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the past 10 years, our recognition of the role of mental health problems in society and the extent to which they affect employment and a range of other issues has increased a great deal. He is right, too, to say that we need to do more work with employers, and that is the focus of the review under way as part of the comprehensive spending review. As part of our employment programmes—this was recently emphasised in the pathways to work programme—we need to ensure that when people on incapacity benefit come to us with a set of problems their mental health problems are recognised. That needs to happen across the board if we are to tackle the problems that my hon. Friend identified.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that at the last reckoning, no fewer than 2,063 young adults in Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Milton Keynes suffered social exclusion by virtue of the fact that they were not in education, employment or training? Does he share my particular concern that 1,000 of those 2,063 people were in that position because of untreated speech, language and communication impairments? Will he give an undertaking to work across government to improve massively the quality and earliness of intervention, so that many of the problems that manifest themselves at a later stage, to such disadvantage to our society, can be avoided?

Edward Miliband: The hon. Gentleman makes his point extremely eloquently, and I know that he takes a personal interest in those issues. He is absolutely right about the importance of treating and addressing special needs issues early. If those needs are not addressed

early—he raised the issue of individuals who are not in education, employment or training—they are not solved, and they come back to haunt those people for the rest of their lives. I will endeavour to work across government on those issues, and I am happy, too, to meet him to talk further about those and other issues.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): In welcoming my right hon. Friend to his new position, may I ask whether he has seen the proposal from the Opposition about a transferable tax allowance, and— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is not for the Minister to discuss the Opposition's policies. If the hon. Lady had phrased her question better, she might have got away with it.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and his colleagues on their appointments, and I look forward to many discussions at the Dispatch Box. The new Prime Minister said in the 1990s:

"We will reverse the gap between rich and poor that has affected our society."

After 10 years in which the right hon. Gentleman had unparalleled powers as Chancellor of the Exchequer, with huge parliamentary majorities, is the Minister proud that today's report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that

"Britain is moving back towards levels of inequality in wealth and poverty last seen more than 40 years ago"?

Is not what is needed the sort of rigorous analysis undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) in the social justice report last week?

Edward Miliband: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome. Over the past two years, he has tried to make the Conservative party address seriously the issues of social exclusion and social justice. That is an uphill struggle, so he is to be congratulated. On his specific question about inequality—yes, it is a problem in our society, and we should all read and acknowledge the Rowntree report. I would point out, however, that its author, Danny Dorling, said today of the "poorest of the poor" that

"that group had actually reduced in size in the last ten years and it also became less geographically concentrated. And that almost certainly is due to Government policies".

The hon. Gentleman is right: inequality is a big challenge that we face in our society, but I believe that on the basis of long-term investment—Sure Start and other things that we are doing—we will start to tackle it, and we should all acknowledge that. Finally, a transferable tax allowance will not help to tackle those issues, which is why the Labour party will not adopt that proposal.

Community and Voluntary Organisations

20. **Ann Coffey** (Stockport) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the work of small community organisations. [149813]

26. **Anne Snelgrove** (South Swindon) (Lab): What plans he has to improve support for the work of small voluntary organisations. [149819]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Phil Hope): A sustainable local voluntary sector is essential for vibrant communities. The Office of the Third Sector is introducing a new £80 million programme of small grants to support small community and voluntary organisations, and the community assets fund, with an additional £30 million, will make it easier for community groups to take on the management or ownership of assets.

Ann Coffey: Many small community and voluntary organisations in my constituency would benefit from, for example, an accountancy service that could do the books of several organisations, or from training to help them when they sit on partnership boards, so I welcome the Government's recognition of that need through the funding that they have given to Capacitybuilders, but I am concerned that the funding does not always reach a very local level. Will my hon. Friend ensure that any future funding for building capacity benefits small organisations and helps them to develop the services that they need at local level?

Phil Hope: First, I commend my hon. Friend for the work that she does in championing the voluntary sector in her constituency. She is right. The £33 million ChangeUp funding programme, which funds local infrastructure organisations, allocates those funds. Allocations are made by an independent body called Capacitybuilders, and it is local consortiums that identify the local priorities. That is under review, and I will draw my hon. Friend's concerns to their attention. I emphasise that we want to get financial help to the very small volunteer-led community groups as well, and the £80 million over four years in the new small grants programme will start to be allocated this financial year. Grants, from £250 up to £5,000, will be allocated to the smallest front-line community groups that make such a difference to the lives of our constituents.

Anne Snelgrove: Will the Minister join me in congratulating Voluntary Action Swindon on its 75th anniversary? It is good to hear what he said about small organisations. Will he give his full consideration to the request from the chief executive, Chris Lau, that the bidding process be made as simple as possible for small charities, which want and deserve access equal to that of larger charities to commissioning funds and the system?

Phil Hope: Many congratulations to Voluntary Action Swindon: 75 years must be close to a track record in this country! My hon. Friend is right to highlight that concern, which is one reason why we have created a national programme for third sector commissioning. This is a training programme for some 2,000 staff who commission public services across the country; half of them will be from local councils. The purpose is to spread best practice in commissioning arrangements, which will deliver better results for third sector providers and, most importantly of all, for the people whom those third sector organisations serve.

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): Does the Minister accept that small community organisations face two problems? One is the tendency of funding agencies to want to fund projects rather than providing core funding, so the key officials and employees who work for those small organisations are not funded. The other is the difficulty that small organisations have with often complex and time-consuming form filling, which is not guaranteed to provide any funding at the end of the process. What are the Government doing about those two issues?

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight those concerns, which have been brought to our attention. That is why we have undertaken the third sector review. We will shortly publish our report on the proposals there. Measures such as three-year funding, for example, will be of great benefit to many voluntary and community groups, ensuring that instead of annual bidding rounds, three-year funding grants and contracts are entered into. That gives local organisations some security, and also means that they do not need to go through the bureaucracy of completing application forms every year. We can be pleased with the measures that the Government have taken. There is always more that can be done, but I hope that the third sector will see the benefits in the very near future.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Minister will know that small community organisations rely heavily on volunteers. He will also know that yesterday Capacitybuilders, an organisation in receipt of £150 million of taxpayers' funds, which is a Government agency, has scrapped its separate dedicated programme to encourage and help voluntary organisations. Does the Minister approve of that decision, has he consulted the new volunteering tsar, Baroness Neuberger, and does it have her support?

Phil Hope: The hon. Gentleman has got his facts wrong. Capacitybuilders has done no such thing as scrapping that programme, but is looking at ways to organise itself better. It is an independent body making decisions to ensure that it can serve and meet the needs of organisations and those who recruit and deploy volunteers to best effect. I am delighted to say that in another place Baroness Neuberger is leading the Government's work on ensuring that we can engage volunteers in public services, not only for the benefit of users of those services but for the benefits that undertaking voluntary activity can have for people who work in those public services. I am greatly looking forward to her work and her energy in championing that cause.

Lynda Waltho (Stourbridge) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware of the chaos caused in my constituency when Tory-controlled Dudley council cut all funding to youth organisations. I am glad to say that it has seen the error of its ways, and the announcement of further funding is excellent. However, continuity of funding is important. Will my hon. Friend agree to come to visit two organisations, the What? Centre and KIDS Orchard Partnership, which now have service level agreements but are worried about the continuity of their funding?

Phil Hope: My hon. Friend, too, champions the voluntary sector loud and clear in her constituency, and it is great that she is drawing my attention to two successful projects in which she has taken a personal interest. I would be delighted to come to her constituency when I can, to see the great work that they do. She is absolutely right to say that local voluntary organisations rely on continuity of funding. That is not helped when a political party makes one set of announcements supporting the voluntary sector but then, at local level, councillors in that same political party decide to cut budgets to try to deliver public services on the cheap. That is something that Labour Members reject—and I only hope that the same signal will go out loud and clear from the Conservative Benches.

Early Years Intervention

21. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to promote early intervention in support of social exclusion policy; and if he will make a statement. [149814]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Gillian Merron): Early intervention is key to tackling social exclusion and is a guiding principle for the social exclusion action plan, which proposes a range of ways to offer help and support during a child's early years, such as the family nurse partnership pilot schemes.

Helen Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend to her new post. Could she tell the House what she is doing to ensure that the very successful Sure Start programmes reach out to the families who are most socially excluded but may well not attend a Sure Start centre, so that those parents and their children are supported and the children are given the best possible start in life?

Gillian Merron: My hon. Friend is correct to raise that point. I thank her for her kind comments to me in my new role. She is a tremendous supporter of Sure Start, which is indeed about making life better for children, families and communities. However, we know that we could do more. That is why I welcome the recently published families at risk review, which talks about how public services can be better organised so that we can better service the small but significant number of families whose problems cannot be dealt with in isolation. I look forward to my hon. Friend's support in doing that.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Has the Minister had discussions with Ministers from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to see how resources can be channelled through schools that have been proactive in this respect, such as George Pindar community school in Eastfield, which is tackling the problem of social exclusion on a whole-family basis?

Gillian Merron: The school that the hon. Gentleman mentions is a clear example of the kind of good work that we want to see. I have heard the Department for Children, Schools and Families referred to as the "Every child matters" Department. That explains the importance of our work in ensuring that every child, no matter what their background or circumstances, will have support to be healthy and safe and to prosper. Schools are absolutely integral to that.

Royal Prerogative

22. **Tony Baldry** (Banbury) (Con): To what extent he expects his responsibilities to the Queen for the general administration of the Duchy of Lancaster to be affected by the proposed changes to the royal prerogative. [149815]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Edward Miliband): The reform of the royal prerogative is designed to make the Executive more accountable to Parliament in important decisions such as going to war and making treaties. Since the appointment of a Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster raises no such issues, we do not currently propose change in this area.

Tony Baldry: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that courteous and informative response, but I was wondering whether he is the Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. If it is the latter, why, at the start of the 21st century, do we require a Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster? If it is the former, will the right hon. Gentleman please ensure that the Table Office has a list of his responsibilities, and those of other Ministers, so that I and other colleagues do not have to dream up questions on the chancellorship and the royal prerogative for his Question Time?

Edward Miliband: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that I have both titles: Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. As to his suggested reform of the role of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, it is a personal prerogative of Her Majesty, but I can pass on his representations to the Prime Minister. My responsibilities cover the span of those of the Cabinet Office, such as social exclusion, the third sector, civil service reform, e-government and a range of other matters. As for his question about the Table Office, I am sure that that is not within my area of responsibility.

Third Sector

23. **Sarah McCarthy-Fry** (Portsmouth, North) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of recent progress towards meeting the Government's objectives for joint working with the third sector. [149816]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Phil Hope): The third sector and the Government are working more effectively than ever before on a range of shared interests, including creating stronger communities, better public services, a stronger social enterprise sector and a more active civil society. Government funding to the sector has more than doubled since 1997 from £5 billion to £10 billion.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Many third sector organisations in my constituency complain that insecurity about funding is impeding their ability to deliver cost-effective, high-quality public services. They welcome the funds for capacity building and pump-priming, but often their funds run out before they have delivered what they want to achieve. What plans does my hon. Friend have to move away from short-term funding to more long-term service level agreements?

Phil Hope: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the fact that Portsmouth was a pathfinder in looking at the kind of barriers that confront voluntary organisations, and in developing an action plan to overcome them. That way of working is now being rolled out throughout the south-east, so I congratulate Portsmouth on that. My hon. Friend puts her finger on an important issue concerning duration of funding. The present Prime Minister made a specific commitment in the 2006 pre-Budget report to ensure that three-year funding will become the norm rather than the exception for voluntary organisations. I am working closely with my ministerial colleagues throughout the Government to ensure that that is the case at every level—national, regional and local.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I have a new Sure Start centre and two new children's centres—[HON. MEMBERS: "Good news!"] That is good news, but the problem lies with the funding. It has been withdrawn from the voluntary organisation that used to provide the very services that are now being provided by Sure Start and the children's centre. Services have closed down and been switched from voluntary status to the state. Is that what the Government intended?

Phil Hope: I guess that what the Government did not intend, when they gave extra funding to support children and families, was that the local Conservative county council in Northamptonshire would then go ahead and cut services for young people there.

Mr. Bone *indicated dissent.*

Phil Hope: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that although his party's Front Benchers may say one thing about support for the third sector, I suggest that he goes back to the Conservative leadership of his local council to ensure that it delivers better services to support the third sector in his area.

Economic Reform

3.33 pm

The Minister for Local Government (John Healey): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on local and regional economic reform in England. The Government are today publishing the conclusions of the review of sub-national economic development and regeneration, launched in the 2006 Budget as groundwork for this year's comprehensive spending review. In this report, we set out the compelling case for reform to give local authorities and communities greater responsibility and opportunity to boost economic growth in their area; to bring consultation and planning for jobs, homes, investment and the environment closer together at both local and regional levels; and to strengthen public scrutiny and accountability of regional plans and the work of regional development agencies, both in the region and in this House.

This report builds on substantial work since 1997 to devolve economic decision making to regions and local authorities. It is informed by Sir Michael Lyons' comprehensive review, in which he underlined the important economic role of local authorities as part of defining and delivering a vision for the places that they serve. It is also informed by Kate Barker's recommendations to bring together planning for homes and the environment with planning for economic growth.

The review takes reform a stage further, giving local authorities stronger incentives and greater powers to support economic growth. As the constitutional Green Paper, which the Prime Minister launched a fortnight ago, said, the sub-national review

"will signal a shift of focus to local authorities, open up the possibility of powerful city regions and give a clearer role for the regions of England".

The report also reflects the Prime Minister's vision of a modern democracy, in which power is exercised at the lowest level, and those with power are held more clearly to account.

Moreover, the reforms are essential as global economic and technological change places an increasing premium on skills, innovation and enterprise. That means that our Government's commitment to increase growth in all regions, reduce regional disparities and deliver neighbourhood renewal will, in future, be all the more challenging and important. It means that further freedoms and devolved decision making are required for regions and local areas: first, to respond to rapid economic change; secondly, to deal with persistent local deprivation or poor economic performance, and thirdly, to enable all places to develop to their fullest potential.

Our year-long review has been very open—we have visited every region and consulted more than 300 stakeholders at all levels. I can confirm our main conclusions to the House this afternoon. First, to give local authorities greater powers, flexibilities and incentives, we will consult on creating a focused statutory economic duty for local councils; put economic development and neighbourhood renewal at the heart of the new local government performance framework; and consider options for supplementary business rates, working closely with business, local government and other local experts. We will require regional development agencies to delegate funding to local authorities and sub-regions whenever possible so that they play a more strategic role, and we will move funding for most 14 to19-year-olds' education and skills to local authorities from the Learning and Skills Council, as announced in the recent machinery of government changes.

Let me deal with sub-regions. To reinforce our cities and larger towns as the engines of economic growth in their areas and to recognise that labour, housing, retail and other markets often do not correspond to council boundaries, we will allow local authorities that work together in sub-regions to strengthen management of transport; develop proposals for multi-area agreements to encourage groups of local authorities to agree collective targets and pooled budgets for economic development priorities; and work with interested city and sub-regions on scope for statutory sub-regional arrangements, which could allow greater devolution of national and regional economic functions.

To strengthen, simplify and improve scrutiny of the necessary strategic role of regions, we will combine the regional economic strategy and regional spatial strategy into a single integrated regional strategy. Following consultation, we will bring together the economic, social and environmental objectives for each region and charge RDAs with executive responsibility to prepare the single regional strategy on behalf of the region. In doing so, they will have a duty to consult widely. They will work closely with local authorities and the first step will be for local authorities to set out a vision for the sustainable development of their area. Regional assemblies in their current form will no longer exist.

The spatial and planning aspects of the strategy will continue to form the regional tier of the statutory development plan, which will remain subject to testing through independent examination in public and will be issued as a statutory document as it is currently. We will strengthen the scrutiny and accountability of RDAs, with the House's new regional Select Committees holding RDAs and others to account in Parliament and with local authority leaders holding the RDA to account in the region and approving the regional strategy. We will consult on how best to implement that.

Finally, at the centre, to improve support and reduce restrictions from central Government we will give the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform single-lead responsibility across Government for performance management of the RDAs and lead responsibility for the regional economic public service agreement; simplify the targets RDAs must meet; and appoint a Minister for each of the regions—we have already done this—to provide a sense of strategic direction to their region and to give citizens a voice at the centre of Government.

The report sets out the principles and direction for future policy and the consultation that we will undertake on our reforms. Important Government announcements will follow: implementing the Leitch report, the housing Green Paper and the welfare reform Green Paper and, in the autumn, the comprehensive spending review. My statement this afternoon is the start of further reform, not the final word. I commend the report to the House.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Minister for his courtesy in allowing me early sight of the statement and of the sub-national economic development and regeneration review.

It is clear that the Minister comes here not to praise the former Deputy Prime Minister, but to bury him. The regional assemblies were the apple of the eye of the former Deputy Prime Minister—now little is left of the old regime but rubble, broken promises and chaos. Once the people of the north-east rejected regional government by referendum, the writing was on the wall for the assemblies.

Will the Minister confirm the words of the Prime Minister's official spokesman this morning that sub-national government was

"just another word for regional government"?

This is a rebranding exercise masquerading as localism. The key tests are these: are the decisions taken locally and are the decision makers democratically accountable to local people?

On page 95, the review makes it clear that RDAs will become the regional planning bodies in place of the regional assemblies. The regional assemblies are unelected, unaccountable and unwanted and we will not mourn their passing. However, is not their abolition just a game of musical chairs, passing their functions from one distant regional quango to another?

We welcome the admission that Labour's tiers of regional red tape are a hindrance to development and regeneration, with the farce of the regional spatial strategies contradicting the regional economic strategies. The RDAs are already failing to deliver on their existing responsibilities, as both the National Audit Office and the Institute of Directors have warned. Yet loading the RDAs with even more responsibility is hardly going to improve the quality of support that local businesses receive.

On page 94, the review asserts that the regional assemblies are not providing a strong voice for their region. Is not the reality that these unloved institutions have ceased to be the Government's poodle because they stood up for local communities and local people? Now that the regional assemblies are criticising the lack of infrastructure and sustainability in the Government's building plans, Ministers are seeking to sideline their opposition. The Government's control freaks' response is to abolish them and to hand their powers to a super-quango—rather than improving co-ordination, the different tiers of regional bureaucracy have caused confusion.

The regional spatial plans of the regional assemblies contradict the regional economic strategies of the regional development agencies—so much for joined-up government. If the Government wish to speed up the planning system, should the first step not be to scrap the quagmire of regional planning? How do the new regional economic growth initiatives outlined on page 93 square with protecting the countryside, planning against flooding, reducing carbon emissions and improving quality of life? Is not the environment now just a passing fashion for the Government? I fear that the RDAs now have England's green belt in their sights.

The review concedes that there are too many funding streams. Indeed, there are 50 different, fragmented funding streams for social exclusion, housing and regeneration. How many will remain after this announcement? Has Labour not just created a baffling array of conflicting, confusing and inconsistent quangos, grants and agencies? Even the Government's friend, Lord Rogers, has slammed the overlapping regeneration schemes as diluting effectiveness and reducing the vision of an urban renaissance to "mediocrity".

We are, of course, receptive to new powers for local councils to fund infrastructure and transport and to promote economic development. Will the Minister guarantee that any additional revenue from a supplementary rate will not be taken into account in central Government grant allocations? Why are local firms not being given a direct democratic vote on any supplementary rate? How high will a supplementary rate go? Will it be 4p on the multiplier or even more? If local businesses can vote on higher rates in a business improvement district, why can they not be given a vote on a supplementary rate? Does the move not risk becoming a back-door way to hike up business rates?

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): A stealth tax.

Mr. Pickles: Good man.

Is the measure not just a stealthy means for the Government to pass the buck of providing infrastructure from the Exchequer to the local taxpayer? Is the move not just higher taxation without any representation?

Month after month since the 2004 "no" vote in the regional assemblies, more and more power has been transferred to expensive and distant regional pen-pushers and politicians. Labour has ignored the voice of the people. Regional government agencies, regional development agencies, regional planning bodies and regional Ministers are all about imposing the will of Whitehall on local communities. Much of the analysis in the report is absolutely correct—it is a catalogue of failure. The problem is that it proposes to reinforce failure with more failure. It risks creating a regional tyranny of governance with no mandate, no legitimacy and no accountability. Only our party will dismantle the regional state, restore power to local communities and make government once more accountable to the people.

John Healey: I am slightly disappointed by the hon. Gentleman's response, but perhaps I should not be surprised. I would urge him and his hon. Friends to read the report rather than simply rehearse their soundbites. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) has been one of the strongest and staunchest advocates of regional devolution and of giving greater powers to local authorities. He was one of the architects of our regional economic policy and my announcement this afternoon and the report take significant steps further in that.

The hon. Gentleman really must make up his mind on regional assemblies. Five days ago he said:

"The regional assemblies are unelected, unaccountable and unwanted."

Four days ago, and again this afternoon, he said that regional assemblies had stood up for local people and that that was why we are abolishing them, and that:

"The Government's move is expected since many of the regional assemblies are criticising the lack of infrastructure and sustainability in its building plans, and Labour wishes to sideline this opposition."

Nothing could be further from the truth and, as I have tried to explain, our plans will mean that, for the first time, we are able to bring together the important planning functions within the regions and local areas on jobs, homes, infrastructure and protection of the environment. We will be able to do so better than before and better than through two separate processes. Council leaders will have a stronger role in the new system, not a weaker one—much more so, in fact, than they did through the regional assemblies.

Let me make it clear that we are committed to ensuring that there is strong local authority oversight of housing and planning. The hon. Gentleman's party called for a stronger role for local authorities, and we are delivering that in the plans that I have announced this afternoon. His party also called for simplified arrangements in the regional and local areas, and we have announced such proposals this afternoon.

We have begun to consider options for supplementary business rates, working with business, local government and other experts. We shall continue with that work and report later in the year. We shall also ensure that there is full and close accountability to business in any of the options that we consider.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I welcome the general approach of the Minister's statement in bringing together economic planning with housing, employment and spatial strategies. I want to ask him a specific question, however, about the proposals for the accountability of RDAs. He appears to be proposing accountability of the regional Committees to Parliament, and also, separately, to council leaders through some other, unspecified, mechanism. Will he consider the introduction of a hybrid committee to bring together MPs from the region and local authority leaders to hold the RDA accountable?

John Healey: I applaud my hon. Friend's interest in this area and the work that she does as Chair of the departmental Select Committee. The principle that we are planning to put in place is that, at regional level, the performance of the RDA in preparing the single regional strategy and in delivering its part of the strategy, as well as the content of the strategy itself, should be subject to greater scrutiny in the region and in Parliament. In the region, that should be conducted by local authority leaders, who will be consulted and charged with scrutinising the preparation of the regional strategy. For the first time, they will also be charged with the role of approving the strategy. In that way, without an elected regional assembly, we shall be able to reinforce public accountability and the democratic oversight of this important work that must be carried out at regional level.

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): I thank the Minister for providing advance copies of his statement and his report, although to read the latter in the given time would have required a reading speed of two pages per minute, so if I have missed any of its subtle nuances, I apologise to him.

We do not share the phobic hatred of all things regional expressed by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles). There are aspects of the statement and the report that we welcome, particularly the recognition that it is important to re-empower local authorities if we are to deliver strongly on the economy and other important features for our local communities. We very much appreciate the intention to encourage co-operation between local authorities, allowing them to take up additional powers devolved from the regions and, we hope, from central Government. It is also good news that there is at least an intention to bring some of the thousands of quangos—including the Learning and Skills Council budget, the Highways Agency and Jobcentre Plus, with which many Members have recently had difficulties—back under local democratic control.

There are also aspects that cause real concern, however. There is nothing substantial in the document or the statement about environmental sustainability; it is all about growth and expansion. For example, I notice that a regional economic public service agreement is to be signed off by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, yet there is no regional sustainability agreement to be signed off by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or agreed with central Government. Will the Minister therefore undertake to add environmental sustainability as a key objective of any regional policy reform?

I also note that the regional Ministers will

"provide a sense of strategic direction for their region".

We could put that another way and say that this will involve a totally top-down process. Will the Minister explain how such a Minister—perhaps the Minister for the North West or, even more to the point, the Minister for London—will form a view about what the strategic direction for the region should be? Will he take his cue from the Secretary of State, from the regional development agency, from local authority leaders or just off the top of his head? The Minister may well feel that the loss of the regional assemblies is not a great one, but surely he would agree that any sense of strategic direction should come from the grass roots, from local communities and local authorities, rather than being imposed on high through ministerial edict.

Reference is made to moving towards a single integrated regional strategy. We have some difficulty understanding precisely what the Minister has in mind, so perhaps he can provide further explanation. Surely there has to be a diversity of strategies for different regions, and, within regions, the strategies need to be flexible enough to take account of the differences between the centre of Manchester, Carlisle and rural Cheshire. How, indeed, will a single integrated regional strategy apply to the region of London, in particular?

To summarise our view, we see this as a severe case of top-down, economic-growth-centred thinking that is some 30 years out of date, with the environment forgotten, democracy overridden and diversity scorned.

John Healey: I was encouraged by the hon. Gentleman's early remarks, but somewhat taken aback by the latter ones—especially as I consulted a Lib-Dem policy document published a week ago today, which states:

[John Healey]

"We would devolve real power back down to communities and local councils, bring quangos under democratic control and reduce central bureaucracy".

Perhaps I should have borrowed those words and incorporated them directly into my statement, because that is precisely what our plans are designed to achieve.

Everyone in every constituency and in every local authority area is concerned about more jobs and more homes, particularly for young people, as well as about taking proper account of the local environment and finding ways up front to fund the infrastructure necessary to support such growth and prosperity for the future. It is by bringing plans for those functions together that we stand the greatest chance of achieving that.

On the environment, let me remind the hon. Gentleman that regional development agencies, which seemed to be the focus of his concern, operate under the legislation that set them up in the first place. They are under a statutory responsibility to pursue sustainable development in the regions. As part of the new arrangements, local authorities will take the first step in the preparation of the new single regional strategy. As I explained earlier, that first step will be to prepare, for their area, their vision of future sustainable development, taking strong account of the needs, pressures and concerns of the environment.

On the question of Ministers, may I gently explain to the hon. Gentleman that the Prime Minister has appointed some first-rate female as well as male regional Ministers, so it is not just a male preserve? If I know anything about my good friends and colleagues who are now the regional Ministers, it is that they will not take their cue from anyone in particular. They will consult and listen carefully, but they will come to their own views and make their own contributions to the debate about what is best for their regions.

Finally, to be as clear as possible, the proposals set out in this afternoon's review do not apply to London, which has its own arrangements on economic policy planning and its own arrangements for democratic control. The regional strategies are, of course, precisely that: they are strategies for the region. If the hon. Gentleman looked into existing regional economic development strategies, he would find that in many cases they place at their centre the cities and sub-regions that are driving economic growth and prosperity within the wider region, creating new jobs and bringing in new investment. That is precisely what this afternoon's proposals are designed to reinforce.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): I hope my hon. Friend recognises that some of us feel that the establishment of regional Select Committees is overdue and welcome this commitment to them, but will the Government ensure that they have real teeth? Will they ensure that the Committees have power to oversee the activities of regional development agencies and all the other quangos, and that Government Departments and agencies are answerable to each of them? If we are going to do this, we must give the Committees teeth and power and make the system effective.

John Healey: As the Prime Minister said two weeks ago, it is important to ensure that those who hold power are called clearly to account. The House has a much greater potential to play a strong role in doing just that at regional level.

I welcome my hon. Friend's support for the principle of the proposed reinforced scrutiny and accountability arrangements, but I should tell him that the setting up of regional Select Committees, their remit and the way in which they conduct their inquiries are a matter for the House. No doubt he will play a big part in discussions of those matters over the next few weeks, but it is not for me, as a Minister, to pass direct judgment.

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): If the newly empowered RDAs are to be accountable to council leaders in the region, what thoughts has the Minister had about appointments to them? At present it is common practice for council leaders to apply for vacancies on RDAs. Is there not a conflict of interest, in that those who are to scrutinise and hold to account see such vacancies as job opportunities?

John Healey: Our report does not propose any changes to the process of appointments to RDA boards, which are conducted entirely in line with the established code of practice for public appointments. However, the hon. Lady makes a fair point and an interesting suggestion. In future it will be for Select Committees and those who wish to hold RDAs firmly to account in the regions to consider how they might contribute to, influence or in other ways become involved in the process of appointments to RDA boards.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. The changes he has announced have the potential to provide a stimulus to encourage renewed regional co-ordination and activity, and will be welcomed in the north-east if they provide the clarity and the new vision that they promise.

The regional assemblies brought together local government, business, voluntary organisations and trade unions. Is my hon. Friend satisfied that the new structure he has announced will preserve the best of that inclusiveness, while also improving accountability and effectiveness at regional level? What powers will localities have over bodies such as the Highways Agency?

John Healey: I am satisfied that the Government have set out the right principles and the right direction for the reforms that are necessary to ensure that the work of RDAs and other agencies at regional level is held to account to a greater extent both in the House and in the regions. If I were not, I would not have announced them today. We are ready to consult on precisely how best to implement the arrangements, and will do so later in the year.

As my hon. Friend will appreciate, the appropriate arrangements for local authority leaders in particular to exercise their role in scrutinising RDAs' work and approving regional strategies in his area will differ from those in the south-east, where there are 74 separate councils. It clearly makes sense to identify, through detailed discussion and consultation, the arrangements that best suit the circumstances of each region.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The Minister delivered his statement with such pathos that I thought we would hear the theme music from "Schindler's List" at any moment. I agree with him that city regions are very important, and they may well be the bit of regional geometry that is coming, but why is he so reluctant to endow them with effective powers? There is still a kaleidoscope of delegated responsibilities and conferred duties. Would it not make sense simply to ask city regions rather than the RDAs to deal with such matters as skills and economic development, so that they have real meaning?

If the Minister wants the system to work in Yorkshire, will he note that the parts of north Yorkshire that used to be in the West Riding and wish to be part of a city region should not be imprisoned in a unitary North Yorkshire council, and thus incapable of performing their duties and meeting their responsibilities?

John Healey: I shall take the right hon. Gentleman's last point as a late submission or representation on the local government restructuring that I am currently considering.

During the review, we were urged in some quarters to impose new formal arrangements in sub-regions. We took the view that the best approach was for there to be greater devolution of powers and freedoms to local authorities, and that they should collaborate where their city or region requires an economic effort that goes beyond their city council or borough council boundaries. We want to encourage such collaboration. Where that takes place, there should be opportunities for greater delegation of powers and management control in respect of transport—and also in respect of economic development, planning, housing and some of the 14-to-19 skills plans. If local authorities together wish to move to statutory arrangements—without pressure or prescription from central Government, because it must be their decision to do so—that will open the door for us to consider devolving more powers from national Departments and regional agencies and to give sub-regions greater certainty and longer term funding for some of the transport functions that can best be delivered at that level.

Mr. Richard Caborn (Sheffield, Central) (Lab): First, may I welcome this timely statement? The regional development agencies were set up a decade ago—in 1997-98—and some of the Opposition's arguments then are the same as those voiced against my hon. Friend today. The RDAs addressed an economic deficit that existed at that time; we inherited a dysfunctional regional policy in 1997, and the RDAs have addressed that. There is now a democratic deficit, and the report and today's statement start to address that through the establishment of Select Committees and through empowering local authorities to play a proactive role. Therefore, I welcome that report and I hope that my hon. Friend will take no account of what the Opposition say. In the 1990s, the electors of Bradford chucked out the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles); he holds no sway with local authorities and I suggest that my hon. Friend continues in the direction that he mapped out in his statement.

John Healey: Alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn) was perhaps the principal architect of early moves to devolve economic policy making to the regions. Indeed, he steered through this House the legislation that set up the regional development agencies. He played an important role during his years in government, and I am glad that he welcomes the further moves that I have announced to devolve more to the regions and local authority areas. If we are able to bring together in a single regional strategy those policies that are currently produced by two different processes and two bodies, often using different bases of information and analysis, we will have the basis for a strong regional vision and strategy that allows us to address at the one and the same time policies on jobs, homes, investment in infrastructure and protection of the environment.

We will also have the basis for achieving what my right hon. Friend continues to want: stronger partnerships at regional and local level and a better alignment of central Government and departmental spending that can help economic development and regeneration through the learning and skills councils, Jobcentre Plus, the new homes agency, the Highways Agency and also the Environment Agency.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): Why in a relatively small country such as England, where we already have well established counties and districts that people relate to, are the Government persisting in developing an unwanted, remote and undemocratic regional tier which people do not relate to?

John Healey: Quite simply, if matters are left at local authority level, there will be concern about equity across regions. As well as that, some projects and priorities need to reach beyond local authority boundaries to foster strategic development in terms of jobs, homes or infrastructure. That is the simple answer, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will accept the relevance and importance of some regional level functions. I hope that he will also accept that that is combined with a clear expectation and requirement for RDAs to devolve the funding to local authorities and sub-regions wherever possible and, by doing that, to reinforce the hand of local authorities to play, for the first time, a greater role in shaping the economy and prospects for their people in their area in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. Many hon. Members wish to catch my eye and, as always, time is limited. I ask for brief questions and answers, so that more hon. Members will be successful.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the recognition of the importance of local authorities, but will my hon. Friend continue to stress the importance of policies decided at a regional level to address regional disparities? Does he commend the north-west's efforts to invest major funding in Daresbury, which has resulted in the region having one of only two centres of excellence for scientific research in the whole country?

John Healey: Yes, yes and yes.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As someone who wishes to see the South East England Development Agency bite the dust alongside the Assembly, may I ask the Minister to explain why it is that those regions of the UK that have had well financed RDAs for longest—and strong regional planning and intervention for longest—have become progressively less well off compared with areas that have not been blessed with such organisations?

John Healey: Perhaps I should send the right hon. Gentleman the results and the figures that demonstrate that in recent years the progress on skills, employment levels and general prosperity has been faster in the poorest regions than the more prosperous regions, in part because of the economic leadership that RDAs and some local authorities, especially in the cities, have been able to provide.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The statement has many welcome aspects and I certainly look forward to further discussions in relation to the accountability arrangements for RDAs. When my hon. Friend talks about the welcome new flexibilities for local authorities, both joined together and on their own, will he address the fact that some of the bigger local authorities at city level, while important as a powerhouse for the region, can be remote from local areas? It will be vital for such authorities to be encouraged to devolve what powers they can internally inside the area, so that community regeneration may accompany economic regeneration.

John Healey: Indeed, and my hon. Friend is the first advocate that I have heard in the Chamber for triple devolution. That is an important principle and it is entirely consistent with the Prime Minister's statement two weeks ago and the Green Paper on constitutional reform. It is important that local authorities do just that, and I hope that my hon. Friend will contribute to further debate and discussion on these matters and consider offering his services to the regional Select Committee in the west midlands.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): What does the phrase

"develop proposals for multi-area agreements to encourage groups of local authorities to agree collective targets...for economic development priorities; and work with interested city and sub-regions on scope for statutory sub-regional arrangements, which could allow greater devolution of national and regional economic functions"

mean in plain English?

John Healey: In plain English, it means that local authorities that cover a wider city area can come together, pool budgets and decide on the priorities that they think are most important for economic development, transport and some of the skills aspects. They can agree those between themselves and with Government, and that will be how we will judge them, how local people judge them and it is what we want to see for the future.

Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley) (Lab): I welcome the abolition of regional assemblies and the transfer of powers and resources to local democracy, but I remind my hon. Friend that almost all the powers and resources of the scores of regional bodies came originally from local government. Would not it make sense to go the whole hog and abolish all the regional quangos and thus empower the electorate instead of other parts of the quango state?

John Healey: I know that my hon. Friend, a former leader of Manchester city council, is a leading advocate for that city and for city regions led by city local authorities. However, I must correct him: the arrangements that we have put in place and which we are looking to take further involve some devolution of powers and decision making from the centre. My hon. Friend follows transport policy very closely, and I remind him of what took place in the most recent funding allocations. In that process, £700 million of what would otherwise be determined entirely centrally was allocated according to the priorities set by the regions, and about which they had advised the Secretary of State.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I welcome some of the proposals that the Minister has outlined, and especially his recognition that communities of interest, such as the seven counties in the south-west, exist at levels below the Government's regional architecture. Will he take seriously the aspirations of the people of Cornwall to have a greater say over their affairs, especially given the ambitious proposals for a unified structure of local government in the area? Also, will he look again at the case for a locally accountable Cornish development agency, in light of the important convergence funding from the EU?

John Healey: Cornwall still faces some significant economic challenges. It has been greatly transformed by the objective 1 funding that it has received, and by some of the measures that the South West of England regional Development Agency has put in place. I take the hon. Gentleman's comments as another late representation to be considered as part of my work on local government restructuring.

Gwyn Prosser (Dover) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement, and his announcement that the regional assemblies will be abandoned. I am especially pleased that the South East England regional assembly will go, as it never understood housing policy or the needs of the east Kent ports such as Dover and Deal. Does he agree that the new devolved structure will reach out to such areas and allow the voices of deprived parts of Kent to be heard? In the past, they have been drowned out by the prosperity of the wider region.

John Healey: Indeed it will, and it is important that those areas that do not shout the loudest or have the strongest clout are at the centre of our policy concerns, as they are in our regional-level planning. My hon. Friend may be interested in the proposals set out in the review for a more concentrated allocation of regeneration funding, and for ensuring that mainstream funding from central Government agencies does more to support local regeneration efforts in the most deprived areas.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I assure the Minister that all my constituents will hear the promises made today to re-empower local

government? Will he confirm that that will mean that the 18,000 new homes that have been imposed on my local community are dead in the water and that they will not go ahead if the local authority continues to object?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman will know that all the regional assemblies are engaged in revising their regional spatial strategies. With the exception of the West Midlands regional assembly, all regional assemblies are due to complete the process by next summer. Under the new proposals, local authorities will be involved in taking the first steps in preparing the regional strategy. They will set out their vision for the sustainable development of their areas, just as 40 towns and cities have raised their levels of housing growth under our growth points programme. The system will reinforce our ability to meet the need for housing, jobs and infrastructure development.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): I welcome today's statement, and remind him that the regional policy adopted by Conservative Governments of the past was very unfair, based as it was on the premise that success should go to the successful. If we are to build a genuinely one-nation approach, we must make sure that there is a regional process that delivers to the people whom this Government want to represent. However, people in my constituency will not know that the regional assemblies are to go, as they do not offer the accountability that we need. Will he guarantee that the Select Committee and local authority approach will mean that regional institutions are properly accountable to local people?

John Healey: The plans we are setting out today for stronger public scrutiny and accountability within the region of the work that the regional development agencies and other regional agencies may do will improve public understanding and public challenge of the work being done in the region on the public's behalf. Clearly, Parliament can reinforce that for the first time, through regional Select Committees, and I hope MPs on both sides of the House will play the most active possible role in making sure that the Select Committees are a success.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): Does the Minister agree that infrastructure is the key to local growth and regeneration, and that building before the infrastructure is put in causes damage to local economies? Will he tell my constituents, who want to hear from him today, how the changes will get Canvey Island its much needed additional access road?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have mentioned that we are considering options for a supplementary business rate and the review also lays out plans for reforming the business growth incentive we introduced just over two years ago for local authorities. In addition, it confirms that we are considering innovative funding methods, particularly to raise early investment capital for local authorities and local areas to develop infrastructure to support growth in the future.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the abolition of regional assemblies and the contribution that will make to lessening global warming by reducing the amount of hot air and strategy papers they produce. I also welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to sustainable development, but in County Durham the regional spatial strategy outlined at present will actually stop development, so will he go one step further and bin the strategy, which has more to do with Soviet central planning than with a modern dynamic north-east economy?

John Healey: Of course the elements of the spatial strategy as a whole, about which my hon. Friend is so concerned, will be subject to independent examination and public scrutiny and, ultimately, to formal statutory sign-off by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It would be far better were powers transferred back to county districts and boroughs, but if we are to persist with some form of regional quangocracy what consideration has the Minister given to establishing a region called Milton Keynes and the South Midlands? At present, that absurd sub-region, involving three parts of three different bigger regions, is meant to control all the housing expansion in Northamptonshire but simply does not provide the transport infrastructure that local people require.

John Healey: I have given no consideration whatever to the creation of a new Milton Keynes region.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): I welcome the generality of my hon. Friend's statement, especially the enhanced powers for local authorities in 14 to 19 provision and in economic development, and the flexibility in allowing city regions to develop at their own pace, which is very important. As well as extra powers for local authorities, will he also consider extra mechanisms to enable economic development to take place, and especially, as recommended by the all-party group on urban development, enhancing the ability to enter into public-private partnerships and to use tax increment funding whereby future income streams can be brought forward to enable capital infrastructure to be put in at an earlier date?

John Healey: I respect deeply my hon. Friend's experience both as a Sheffield city leader before he entered the House and in his work on the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government. He is right to identify the fact that public money must be used to leverage in much greater private sector investment to help with regeneration and development. He will want to look particularly closely at the passage in the review on our work on innovative funding mechanisms, including possible options for regional infrastructure funds, better use of local authority assets and reliable revenue streams against which local authorities may be able to borrow to fund the infrastructure development needed in the future. We will report back on that work by the pre-Budget report this year.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I very much welcome my hon. Friend's statement, but I have a concern about the use of private consultants. For too many years, there has been widespread use of private consultants in local economic development. They have been expensive, incompetent and unaccountable. Will

[Kelvin Hopkins]

he urge all local authorities to do the job in-house, with directly employed public servants, and not to use private consultants?

John Healey: I thought that I had moved from the Treasury, where I had to deal with questions like that over the previous five years. My hon. Friend is right in general terms to challenge the way in which local authorities and other agencies may use their resources. I hope that he will play a part in doing just that on the regional Select Committee that will serve his region. However, sometimes it is important that expertise that may not rest within a local authority can be brought in so that local authorities can do a better job of analysing the economic circumstances of their area and plotting and planning priorities for the future.

Ministers for Women (Priorities)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Will Members who are not staying for this Statement please leave as quickly and quietly as possible? Thank you.

4.26 pm

The Minister for Women (Ms Harriet Harman): I would like to set out to the House how my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) and I intend to take forward our work as Ministers for Women. We are publishing today a paper setting out our priorities. The Women's National Commission has agreed that it will take forward a consultation outside the House on the priorities and I am grateful to it. Our work in government will focus on three issues: first, helping families who care for older and disabled relatives, as well as those bringing up children; secondly, tackling violence against women and improving the way in which we deal with women who commit crimes; and, thirdly, empowering black and Asian women to help them as a force for good in their communities and as they build bridges between communities.

Families need to have enough time and money to care for older and disabled relatives, and to bring up their children in the way they want. They need proper support from good local services for both older relatives and children. As Ministers for Women, we will build on the strong foundation of support for families which the Government have already delivered to ensure that all families have real choices about how they live their lives. On this, we will be working alongside our ministerial colleagues in the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Treasury, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

This first strand of work will also include pressing forward with the Government's commitment to tackle the pay gap between men and women—a gap that is not only unfair in principle, but which plays such a large part in the unequal division of labour in the home, preventing fathers from playing a more active role in their children's early years and preventing women from fulfilling their opportunities at work. As Ministers for Women, we will also work with Ministers in the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Communities and Local Government on how health and other local services can better support families who care for older and disabled relatives.

The second strand of our work will be about women who are victims of violent crime and women who are offenders. Domestic violence still results in two homicides every week. It not only harms women but has a devastating impact on children. Human trafficking takes many forms and blights the lives of men, women and children in many different continents. Britain is a major focus for the global trade in the sexual exploitation of women by traffickers, who trick or abduct young women and force them into prostitution. We have done a great deal to step up action against domestic violence, sexual offences and human trafficking, but there is more to do. We need to ensure that the substantive law is right and make it clear beyond doubt that domestic and sexual violence against women, and human trafficking for prostitution, will not be tolerated. We will be working alongside

Ministers in the Home Office and with my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General to tackle this.

On women who commit crimes, my noble Friend Baroness Corston found that many of the women in prison are there for minor, non-violent offences, and that many of them have mental health problems, or problems to do with drug or alcohol abuse. On women offenders, we will work with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice on taking forward the agenda so ably mapped out by Baroness Corston. We can and will do more to ensure that women who have offended are rehabilitated, and that women who are at risk of offending are prevented from doing so. As Baroness Corston outlined, we will do so through ensuring effective services for drug and alcohol addiction, and for mental health problems.

Thirdly, we will work on the issue of empowering women in black and Asian communities. Women play a crucial role working together in their communities, whether they are working to reduce crime in their area, like Mothers Against Guns, or working to improve local services by taking part in tenants and residents associations, school governing bodies and parent teacher associations, or whether they are Asian women, like Southall Black Sisters, working to support other Asian women. We want to do more to support and empower those women as they tackle problems within, and build bridges between, communities.

We will work closely with ministerial colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to take our agenda forward. We will also work with Ministers from across Government to ensure that black and Asian women have fair opportunities to work and take part in wider public life, including by becoming councillors and Members of the House of Commons. I hope that we can take that work forward with the support of local government, and supported by, and working with, Members of the European Parliament. We will also work alongside voluntary organisations, women's organisations such as Women's Aid and the Women's Institute, trade unions and employers. We want to work not just with our ministerial colleagues, but with hon. Members, both women and men, on both sides of the House.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for coming to the House to make her statement today. I certainly welcome the sentiment behind what she has said, and I look forward to working constructively with her, as my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) did with the Minister's predecessor, to improve the lives of women in Britain. However, I am disappointed by the lack of ambition that has been shown in an area where there is still so much to be achieved. Will she confirm that not a single part of today's statement is a new policy? I have to ask why, after 10 years in power, the Minister is only launching a consultation on the important issues that were mentioned.

We live in a time of rapid social and economic change. Even in the 10 years since 1997, the workplace and the world beyond it have changed remarkably. Government policy relating to women has to keep pace with that change, but it has not always done so. The issues confronting women are diverse and complex, so instead of having a one-size-fits-all idea of how women should lead their lives, Ministers must pursue a policy based on choice for women who are free and empowered to make their own decisions.

The right hon. and learned Lady said that she would focus on helping families, tackling violence against women, and empowering women in black and minority ethnic communities. Those are laudable aims, and when she comes up with new policies, we will support her if she gets them right, but as usual, the rhetoric exceeded the reality by some distance. She said "the Government have already delivered to ensure that all families have real choices", but what about the 90 per cent. of families who use a relative or neighbour to care for a child? They do not get the support that is available to those who use Government-approved child care. What about women's pensions? One in four single women pensioners lives in poverty, yet the Minister did not even mention pensions in her statement.

The Minister said that she will be "pressing forward with the Government's commitment to tackle the pay gap", but that implies that the Government are already making progress, and they are not: women who work full time earn 17 per cent. less than men. Does she accept that progress on equal pay has stalled? She mentioned violence against women. The Government have indeed acted on the issue of domestic violence, but does she agree that we need further action—and, I suggest, a change to police attitudes—on stalking, an issue on which the Government have so far done little? The Minister said, "We have done a great deal to step up action against...human trafficking". The Government signed up to the convention on action against trafficking in human beings, but it still has not been ratified. In questions to the Minister for Women on 5 July, I asked when it would be ratified and what specific policy changes have been made as a result of signing the convention. The right hon. and learned Lady did not answer. Will she do so now?

The Minister said that she will work with the Justice Secretary to address problems with women in prisons. We know his answer to problems in prisons—he tends to let people out—but the crisis caused by the lack of prison capacity exacerbates the problems experienced by female prisoners. In the outside world, women are three times less likely than men to commit suicide; in prison, they are twice as likely to do so. Women prisoners are twice as likely as men to be held more than 50 miles from home. How can the right hon. and learned Lady reconcile the hope of improving the lot of female prisoners with the reality of overcrowded jails?

Today's statement betrays the problem behind the Government's approach to women's issues—a problem that goes all the way back to 1997. While some changes are indeed welcome, there is no coherent philosophy or joined-up strategy that underpins that policy. That needs to change. I welcome the fact that the right hon. and learned Lady has set out priorities for women today, but I do not welcome the fact that there is so little substance in her statement. Women of all types and in all circumstances—mothers with children who are juggling their work-life balance, women in pensioner poverty, and vulnerable women—are looking to her for more than fine words. When she returns to the House to make her next statement on women's issues, we expect substance, not style.

Ms Harman: The right hon. Lady appears to agree that these are the right priorities—it is right to focus on families, violence against women, and to support women in their communities. I assume she believes that those are the right priorities, but she criticised us for a lack of ambition. If she wants us to be more ambitious, I would welcome her support for our programme becoming more ambitious. It is important that we will the ends as well as the means. It is not right to say that one supports families who want to balance work and home but then vote against the legal rights necessary to help them. It is not right to say that one supports the fight against human trafficking but will not work with colleagues in Europe to deal with a Europe-wide problem. It is not right to say that one supports women in black and minority ethnic communities if one will not support the financial investment in those poor and deprived communities that the Government have made.

I urge the right hon. Lady to join us in our commitment to do a great deal more, and will the means, not just the ends. Rhetoric—she is absolutely right—does not help a single family, does not protect one single victim of crime, and does not help any minority ethnic woman struggling in her community. We have done a great deal, but we have brought to the House a focus on priorities in areas where we need to do more. I acknowledge that we have not set out a list of new policies. We have said what our three priority areas are so that people in the House and, importantly, people outside it, know what we are focusing on and can work with us to achieve it.

The right hon. Lady talked about choice and people being free to lead their lives how they want. Part of the problem is that the less money someone has and the fewer services available to them, the less choice they have, so I look forward to her support for extra financial support and public services. She talked about the difficulty of families caring for children, and it is true that one of the big demands from families is that people should have more time so that they can care for young children within the family, which is why tax credits and the minimum wage are so important. If someone has to work all hours to make ends meet, they do not have any time with their children, so the minimum wage is not just about money but about time.

The right hon. Lady spoke about pensions. Women in retirement suffering from inequality and having a poor standard of living is a very important issue for the Government, about which my hon. Friend the Minister for Pensions Reform will say more when we discuss the Lords amendments to the Pensions Bill in the next item of business.

The right hon. Lady said that action on the pay gap had stalled, and she mentioned some figures. It is true to say that the pay gap between women working full-time and men working full-time is about 12 per cent., but the pay gap between women working part-time and men working full-time is 40 per cent., so I agree with her that much more needs to be done to tackle unequal pay, and I look forward to her wholehearted support for more radical measures. I will pray her in aid when I am talking to my colleagues on the subject.

The right hon. Lady said that we had not done anything about stalking. That is not the case. We introduced the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, and we have done a great deal of work with the police, prosecutors and the voluntary sector to deal with the menace of stalking.

On human trafficking, it is not just a question of signing up to and ratifying conventions. It is what we do about the problem, working with the police, prosecutors and the courts. It is what we do about what is happening in our communities. I have a local newspaper, the *Ham & High*. The whole House should think about this. Here are some extracts from the personal ads:

"New Polish girls",

"New Japanese & Korean girls",

"Romanian ladies",

"New oriental beauty",

"All girls 18-25",

"New tropical models",

"Beautiful girls daily. All nationalities".

We need to think—

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): If the Government ratify, we can deal with it.

Ms Harman: No. We need to think of the demand side of the problem. Who is reading those ads? This is a very difficult issue. There is no consensus about how we deal with the demand side—the men, the fathers, the sons, the brothers, the husbands who are reading those ads and who are fuelling the demand side of global sexual exploitation of women.

I welcome the support of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) for our focus on women in prison. I think we can make progress on that. We would welcome working co-operatively with her on it. She says that the problem behind our approach is a lack of—did she say ideology?

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): A lack of ambition.

Ms Harman: A lack of ambition, but the right hon. Lady did say something about a lack of ideology. Our commitment is to making sure that we tackle inequality and empower women. I hope she will work with us on that.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for the courtesy of allowing me prior sight of the statement. I take the opportunity to welcome her to her position. She has an impressive track record of working on women's issues, and I hope that in government she will be a strong advocate for women on a wide range of issues.

In the statement, the right hon. and learned Lady rightly put support for families up front. One of the biggest challenges facing women is balancing their family responsibilities and their work commitments, although that is an issue for men as well. We should not pigeon-hole it as a women's issue. Indeed, we will probably be able to conquer the problems only when men, too, are engaged with the changes that are required.

On the pay gap, the figures have already been quoted—12.6 per cent. for full-time work and 40 per cent. for part-time work, and we need to do more to

reduce the gap. Will the Minister consider extending equal pay audits to the private sector? On flexible working, the paper published today alongside the statement says that the Government are considering extending flexible working to parents of older children. Does that mean up to the age of 18? Will the Minister go further and accept that extending to all the right to request flexible working would help to change our working culture and reduce some of the resentment that can be created when some colleagues have an opportunity to request flexibility and others cannot?

Clearly, affordable child care is an important part of that, and I welcome the Government's moves to make child care more affordable. Are new resources being announced to facilitate that? If not, how does the Minister expect that that will be achieved?

I agree with the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) that the part that was missing from the families section of the statement concerned women's pensions. Later today we will debate the Pensions Bill. Although there are some welcome improvements for women who have taken time out to care for families, they will be applied only after 6 April 2010. The difference that that will make to women who reach pension age the day before is that they will lose out on £27,000-worth of pension entitlements. I urge the Minister to comment on whether she thinks that is fair. If we are really going to be fair to women on pensions, surely it is time that the Government went one step further and based pensions on residency rather than national insurance contributions, because even under the new plans women with fewer than 30 years of NICs will not be entitled to a full pension.

On violence against women, it is welcome that a lot of cross-Government working is planned. The End Violence Against Women campaign has been scoring the Government in this respect. They got one out of 10 in 2005 and two out of 10 in 2006, so I hope that the trend is on the up. I hope that this will lead to better cross-departmental working, because that is what the campaign says has been missing, although individual strategies have been in place, for example on domestic violence. What steps will the Minister take to create an integrated strategy involving all Departments to tackle violence against women, instead of a piecemeal approach?

The moves on women in prison are welcome. We will of course scrutinise the Government on delivery and the action that is taken. However, given that four out of five women prisoners have a mental illness, it is urgent that the situation is tackled, and we will give the Government support in doing so.

On trafficking, it is welcome that the Government have now signed the European convention against trafficking in human beings and is planning the new legislation that is needed to implement the actions necessary to deal with the problem. The advertisements that the Minister read out from the newspaper will have been shocking and horrific to us all. However, while all these things are being put in place, it would be helpful for the House to have some idea of roughly when we can expect the convention to be ratified.

It is well documented that black and Asian women in communities across the UK suffer more discrimination than white women or black and Asian men, so that is clearly an important issue for the Government to tackle. However, the Commission for Racial Equality recently expressed disappointment about the discrimination law review and is concerned that there may be proposals to wrap the equality duties into one single duty that ends up being weaker. What reassurance can the Minister give that new proposals to simplify existing equality legislation will not result in a rolling back or weakening of the current race and gender equality duties?

Ms Harman: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position and look forward to working with her. I thank her for her comment about the decades of work that I have done in this area. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage and I do not find ourselves on our own in taking forward this agenda. As well as the many men on the Labour Benches who support it, 97 women Labour Members of Parliament will ensure that it is taken forward.

The hon. Lady rightly says that this is an issue for men as well as women. If a new baby comes along and the father is earning much more than the mother is, he has to work increased hours to bring home more money while she works fewer hours to care for the child. The difficulty is that there is no choice. Because he is earning so much more, she has to be the one who takes more time off—they cannot share the responsibility equally or even decide that he will be the one who stays at home and looks after the child. Unequal pay is not just a matter of principle but a matter of choice within families at home. We have taken forward greater rights to paternity leave. Families are not just about women. Women shoulder most of the responsibility of the work of caring for young children and elderly relatives, but men increasingly want to share that responsibility, and we must ensure that the labour market and pay rates do not prevent them from doing so.

I agree with the hon. Lady that equal pay is important, but it is difficult to make progress in tackling discrimination in pay, or unequal pay, while it remains hidden. That is why I welcome our commitment to ensure that Departments publish gender pay audits, so that we can see what is happening in terms of pay rates.

The hon. Lady spoke about the right to request flexible working and suggested that everyone should have the right to request it. It is argued by many, particularly the Equal Opportunities Commission, that if everybody, not just those with children, or with disabled or older relatives, were entitled to request flexible working, it might reduce the hostility of those without children, or such relatives, towards those who have them. We must recognise that it is a social policy imperative to ensure good family care and support for children, disabled relatives and the elderly. We have to argue that case to people and say, "If you don't have those responsibilities, you are freer at your work, and can do more work than those who are working on behalf of their own family and society as a whole in supporting and caring for elderly relatives, or bringing up children." There is not a public policy equivalence between allowing flexible work in order to let someone play a round of golf, and allowing it so that someone can care for an older relative. I do not agree with the hon. Lady's line of argument on that.

We have made progress on affordable child care, but—heavens above—we are just at the start. Many

[Ms Harman]

families are tearing their hair out because affordable, flexible, high-quality child care is still not available to them. We have a long way to go—there is no doubt about that.

The hon. Lady talked about inter-departmental working on violence against women. We are considering merging the inter-ministerial group on domestic violence and the inter-ministerial group on sexual offences in order to take an overall view across Government on violence against women.

The hon. Lady recommended that in order to tackle the problem of the inequality of men's and women's incomes in retirement, we should simply use residence in this country as the main criterion, rather than the contributory system. My view is that we must ensure that people can contribute when going out to do paid work, which should be recognised in their national insurance contributions, but when they stay at home, caring for elderly or disabled relatives, or children, that too should be recognised as a contribution, and they should be credited for it. The problem with our system is not that it has been contributory, but that the only contribution, which has been disproportionately recognised, is paid work, not the valuable unpaid work that women do in their families. That is the historic problem.

I agree with the hon. Lady that overcrowding in women's prisons is a particular problem. It is cruel for women prisoners with mental health problems, who have offended because they were victims of violence and sexual abuse in childhood, or because of those mental health problems. We have a positive programme concerning women offenders, which has been ably mapped out by my noble Friend Baroness Corston.

The hon. Lady spoke about the review of discrimination law. There is no intention to have weaker legal duties; it is a matter of strengthening the role that the law can play in equality.

Finally, on the ratification of the convention on human trafficking, when I was Solicitor-General—a role that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Redcar (Vera Baird) now has, and she is doing a terrific job—I worked with prosecutors in Brussels and many European countries, and with Interpol, and I can tell the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) that what we sign is very important, but beyond that is what we actually do. It is a question of what we do about the demand side. We are talking about billions of pounds of serious, organised crime.

I am in favour of ratification and implementation of any such treaty, but we need to consider some serious issues. What are we going to do about demand? Why is trafficking a multi-billion pound, lucrative serious organised criminal business? It is because men pay for sex with exploited, trafficked girls. We need to consider what we are going to do about that. We need to work further on whether and how to criminalise such exploitation. In Sweden, the problem has been tackled by making paying for sex a criminal offence. We must examine the way in which other countries try to deal with the problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Many Members want to speak. May I make a plea for brief, single questions and short responses?

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her statement. It is great to have the priorities laid out at the beginning of her term as a Minister and I welcome the fact that consultation will take place. I especially welcome the section of the statement on carers. What more can we do to help carers who are unable to work outside the home because they look after a disabled or elderly relative and may consequently live in poverty and also be isolated? Has she considered those issues?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend may well be aware that the Prime Minister announced a review of support for carers. We must all acknowledge that the subject will move up the agenda, given that people with disabilities live longer, older people live to a greater age and family care is the choice of the older person and of the family. The question is, as my hon. Friend points out, how we support people to make those choices without their suffering financial destitution and social isolation.

I thank my hon. Friend for her comments about me and my work. I pay tribute to her work in setting up Cardiff Women's Aid, which is an exemplar of tackling violence against women, and in child care in Cardiff, including Chwarae Teg, which was a joint organisation of employers, trade unions and women's organisations for greater flexibility at work.

John Bercow: I warmly welcome the right hon. and learned Lady's priorities for women in public policy, but they must be reflected in such priorities in the work of the House. Given that she is both Minister for Women and Leader of the House, will she conduct an urgent conversation with herself and then agree with me that it is monstrous discrimination against her that she is allowed to answer oral questions for only 10 minutes a month, that the time should be at least tripled, and that, given that she is Minister for Women, it is only right and proper that, in 2007, we should have a Select Committee on women's issues?

Ms Harman: The idea of having a conversation with myself and ending up agreeing with the hon. Gentleman is interesting. The point about setting out our priorities is that we will work alongside our ministerial colleagues as they take policies through their Departments, and they will be accountable to the House. Additionally, as women Ministers we are accountable. We must ensure that the priorities and objectives are clear and made mainstream in the work of different Ministers, who are then held to account by Select Committees.

All the time, we need to think about the structures of accountability and how we create a greater focus on the issues that we are considering. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments in that spirit.

Margaret Moran (Luton, South) (Lab): I very much welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's emphasis on violence against women and her reference to the impact on children. I know that she is aware of the project that I am currently running with Women's Aid

called Kidspeak, through which we listen to the experiences of children who are affected by domestic violence. Does she realise that some of the evidence already shows that impacts include truancy, self-harm and poor school performance? There is also a terrible lack of resources to support those children. Will she urgently look into that as part of her priorities?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend set up the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence, which made me remember what a long way we have come since the days of Jo Richardson, who was politely ignored if she mentioned domestic violence once in the House and had people muttering behind their hands if she mentioned it twice.

My hon. Friend's Kidspeak work reminds us that the old view that people should stay together for the sake of the children even while enduring violence misunderstood the effect of domestic violence on children. All the evidence is that even if children are not physically caught in the crossfire—sometimes they are and sometimes they are killed at the same time as their mother—they are always traumatised and damaged by being in a household where there is domestic violence. That is why it is important not just for women, but for children in the family.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement; we expect great things from both her and the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett). The Director of Public Prosecutions gave a rousing and informed address to the all-party group on human trafficking yesterday and admitted that trafficking was on the increase. The Minister will not be surprised to know that the statutory police performance targets do not include trafficking, so there is no pressure on the police to apprehend traffickers.

In her consultation, will the right hon. and learned Lady look at the question of compensation for victims when traffickers are apprehended? At the moment, not one penny piece has been given by traffickers to their victims. One of the most important things that the Minister could do is to make sure that the victims of trafficking receive not only the identity cards that give them the right to stay in this country, but compensation for the awful ordeal they have gone through.

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman says that he expects great things of myself and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. We will make great progress if we all work together on this. Many of these issues are difficult, but we need to recognise the scale of the problem and to take radical action. We have to build on these agendas or we will not make progress; we cannot be cautious. I hope that we can work with the hon. Gentleman, to whom I pay tribute, along with the other members of the all-party group, which does good work. I will consider and discuss with my colleagues his point about targets.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about compensation. The CPS has been focusing more not just on apprehending, prosecuting and punishing the offenders, but on seizing the assets. There are vast assets involved and the problem is that someone can spend a couple of years in prison, then come out and live like a millionaire. The more assets there are, the more they get reinvested in bringing more women from different parts of the world to be sexually exploited and raped in this country. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of freezing and seizing the assets. He is also right about the importance of the courts using the powers to order compensation. I am interested to hear that he has already had a discussion with the Director of Public Prosecutions and I will discuss this with my ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and with the Solicitor-General to see whether we can encourage further progress in this respect.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May I once again ask Members to ask a single question and for there to be a brief response? Many hon. Members are still hoping to make a contribution.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): I very much welcome the priority given to women at work, especially tackling the pay gap. Will my right hon. and learned Friend look at the outstanding work being done by the YWCA, in its "More than one rung" campaign, in getting women apprenticeships in areas of skilled work that attract higher pay, such as building, electrical engineering and car work, so that they can earn more pay when they are training and throughout their working lives?

Ms Harman: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to my attention the work that the YWCA is taking forward. She is absolutely right that it helps to tackle the pay gap. However, the additional point is that if young girls can see a future for themselves and have aspirations, that is the best way of avoiding teenage pregnancy and ensuring that they have financial independence. It was said to me a few moments ago by one of the officials with whom we were talking about teenage pregnancy that the best contraception is aspiration.

Mrs. Iris Robinson (Strangford) (DUP): As my party's spokesman on health and women's issues, I welcome genuine attempts by the Government to improve the lot of women generally. However, I have some issues concerning the objectives. The right hon. and learned Lady has said:

> "We are creating the Commission for Equality and Human Rights—a single equality body for race, religion and belief, gender, disability and sexual orientation—and we are currently consulting on the Discrimination Law Review."

What will the Government do to protect the Christian ethos of the United Kingdom, where currently we cannot have nativity plays or send Christmas cards because that is deemed to be offensive to ethnic minorities? Could the right hon. and learned Lady expand on that?

Also, in relation to recognised—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have stressed the importance of asking just one question, because so many people want to make a contribution.

Ms Harman: We have introduced legal protection against discrimination on the grounds of religion. There is of course no prohibition on people sending

[Ms Harman]

out Christmas cards; indeed, the House of Commons produces marvellous Christmas cards. We all send out box-loads of those cards and none of us has been prosecuted for doing so. As far as nativity plays are concerned, many hon. Members go to many nativity plays in primary schools, and long may they continue to do so.

Lynda Waltho (Stourbridge) (Lab): Make no mistake: women welcome the Government's focus on domestic violence and the progress that has been made over the past 10 years. However, those who work with and support victims, particularly women, are frustrated by the plethora of initiatives across Departments. I welcomed the comment about an inter-ministerial group. However, in the spirit of embracing talent, will my right hon. and learned Friend consider bringing on to that body people such as Sandra Horley from Refuge and women who work at Women's Aid, who are the real experts, to assist that co-ordination?

Ms Harman: The initiatives that we have taken forward on domestic violence, such as specialist domestic violence prosecutors, specialist domestic violence courts and extra support for victims, are important and make a difference. The only problem with them is that they are not yet rolled out so that every part of the country is as good as the best. Because of those initiatives and showing that they work, we have been able to make progress.

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the important work of Refuge and Women's Aid. They are the organisations that work on the front line and they are the experts. In every hon. Member's constituency there are women working to tackle domestic violence. They are the experts. We need to listen to them and ensure that we do more. There is a danger, however, in that we must ensure that, while saying that we will not tolerate domestic violence and are determined to act on it, we back that up with practical action, because there is a such a big need for change.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): A visible example of the inequality in society is the unequal provision of toilet and restroom facilities for women. What will the Government do to try to correct that imbalance in public buildings? Will the right hon. and learned Lady join me in condemning Tory-controlled Colchester borough council, which is building a public building worth £14 million, where 75 per cent. of the toilet provision is for males and 25 per cent. is for females?

Ms Harman: Toilet facilities are a big issue for women whose young children need to go to the toilet—they often find that shops will not let them use their facilities—and for older people, who are disproportionately women. My own view of how to solve this problem is to have more women local councillors. If, instead of only one in four councillors being women, there were equal numbers of women and men, these issues could move up the agenda and be discussed with purpose and without embarrassment.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's statement and the Government's commitment to dealing with issues of concern to women. Will she also press local authorities that are drawing up local social care plans to take into account the needs of women caring for elderly relatives? Those women's needs often go unrecognised.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. She has a background of expertise in social care based on a great deal of experience, including her work in the House. However good the social services are, it is important that older people and people with disabilities are also supported by their families. However great the health services, social services and voluntary sector may be, family care is essential as well. As part of that, we need to ensure that our planning does not only involve building lots of housing for nuclear families. The infrastructure of the community must include facilities for children—playgrounds, schools and nurseries—and it must also have housing for old people, including granny flats, sheltered housing and day centres. We need to build "family friendly" into the planning infrastructure.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we should be concerned equally about all prisoners with mental health problems, whether they be men or women? And if she really believes in equality between men and women, will she abolish her politically correct position, or at least create a Minister for men?

Ms Harman: When the hon. Gentleman's party was in government, it had a spokesperson for women who was quite often a man—*[Interruption.]* The Minister for Women in the previous Tory Government was often a man. The hon. Gentleman will recognise that women are still under-represented in the House of Commons. Indeed, there are still only 17 Conservative women Members of Parliament. To the extent that they are ensuring that he enters the 21st century, we will back them up.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's statement. What steps will be taken to build on the excellent work of the Sure Start schemes, some of whose funding is coming to an end? They have transformed the lives of many vulnerable young children, and their mothers, in my constituency, particularly in Leek and Biddulph. They have done a tremendous amount of valuable outreach work and developed excellent children's centres, creating a real legacy for the future.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I know that she did a great deal to ensure that those two Sure Start centres were opened in Leek and Biddulph. The Sure Start programme is still being rolled out, and the first centres are in place. We all know from our experience of talking to parents whose children are in Sure Start centres that they are incredibly important for those children. We will be pressing on, irrespective of various bits of research that suggest that they are neither useful nor popular; we believe that they are both.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) mentioned the 2010 pension changes, and I congratulate the Government on those changes, which will be of huge

benefit to many women. However, although some women will benefit to the tune of £20,000 to £30,000 over the whole of their retirement, it seems unfair to bring in the changes overnight, because that could result in someone who is only one day older suffering poverty throughout their retirement. May I invite the Minister for Women to co-ordinate a meeting between me and my hon. Friends and her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to look at ways of phasing in the provision so that more women can benefit from the Government's very good scheme?

Ms Harman: I know my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions are concerned to work with as wide a group of people as possible, and with both sides of the House, as we work together to tackle the pensions problem. The Minister for Pensions Reform will deal with those issues when he discusses Lords amendments under the next item of business before the House.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's statement. Last summer, I spent a considerable amount of time with the Wolverhampton police domestic violence unit, which expressed real frustration with the problems it faces in getting women who are domestically abused actually to take legal action against their abusers. Will my right hon. and learned Friend undertake to incorporate the suggestions and ideas of groups such as the police—and, indeed, the voluntary sector, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Lynda Waltho) mentioned—in the formulation of her cross-ministerial policy?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Those who commit acts of domestic violence should be prosecuted and brought to justice; otherwise, the sense is that someone assaulting a person while walking down the street will be brought to justice, while someone assaulting a wife or girlfriend behind closed doors will get away with it. We need to get the message out that domestic violence is a crime that will be tackled, so it is crucial to bring offenders to justice. The difficulty is that many women fear that if they report domestic violence or give evidence in court, they will be even more at risk. That is why it is so important for support services—Victim Support, voluntary organisations and local authorities—to support women in taking action against perpetrators of domestic violence. I pay tribute to the many women who are prepared to go to court. They know that if they want to walk away from it and get on with their lives, they must ensure that the man does not get on and assault his next girlfriend.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In demonstrating the seriousness with which the right hon. and learned Lady takes her role and acknowledging the importance of fair treatment for women in work, will the Minister for Women liaise with the Financial Secretary and the Minister with responsibility for prisons to stop the proposed closures of the tax offices in Kettering and the Prison Service office at Crown house in Corby? The work force at those places are overwhelmingly female, with women often working part-time and having child care responsibilities. In my view, the proposed closures of those offices are completely discriminatory. If the Minister for Women means what she says, those closures should be stopped.

Ms Harman: I am told that a gender impact survey is being carried out on the effect of those changes. I will draw the hon. Gentleman's comments to the attention of my ministerial colleagues.

Anne Snelgrove (South Swindon) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work as Solicitor-General she did for bereaved families—the Mullane family in my constituency, for example—after women have been killed through domestic violence. Is she aware of the excellent work done by the Wiltshire police, who have made domestic violence a priority, particularly by opening a domestic violence treatment centre in north Swindon? What discussions has she had with ministerial colleagues across Government to enable the lessons from such centres to be learned?

Ms Harman: The domestic violence homicide that took place in my hon. Friend's constituency was a tragic killing of a woman and her young son. Clearly, important lessons must be learned from that experience. I am pleased to hear about my hon. Friend's support for the work of the Wiltshire police. I would add that one thing that we should do is ensure that the substantive law is right. I am concerned when it is still possible for a man to escape a murder charge if he goes out, buys a knife, comes home and kills his wife as he has planned. If he can convince the court that he killed her only because he loved her and if he can secure the defence of provocation, the charge will drop down to manslaughter. That is why we need to reflect further on the substantive law and the message it sends out. We cannot allow the victim to be blamed after being killed.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the incidence of successfully prosecuted rape is significantly low by comparison with the number of cases referred to the Crown Prosecution Service? Is it not time to reconsider the tests used by the CPS, and to determine whether they are appropriate to the prosecution of rape cases?

Ms Harman: The test for a prosecution is, and I think must remain, whether there is enough evidence, whether a jury is more likely than not to convict on the basis of the evidence that there is, and whether it is in the public interest to prosecute. It will almost inevitably be in the public interest to prosecute in cases of rape.

I think that the rate of convictions for rape—convictions as a percentage of reported offences—is falling either because reporting is increasing as a result of an increased incidence of rape, or because women are now more likely to be confident enough to report it. Possibly it is a bit of both. However, we must do more to tackle rape. It tends to be a repeat offence, and unless the perpetrators are brought to justice there is a danger that further victims will suffer.

Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and was pleased to hear my right hon. and learned Friend mention the Corston report and the need to implement its recommendations. Can she confirm that it will be a priority for her office to improve the services available to women when they leave prison and that, crucially, they will be available at the point of release to help prevent reoffending and women from falling back into the abusive relationships that often led them to prison in the first place?

Ms Harman: I think it extremely important not just for us to do more to prevent women from falling into offending, but for women who are sent to prison to be better prepared for life outside it. The work of the St Giles trust in my constituency involves former women prisoners meeting women as they come out of the prison gates to help them ensure that their lives stay on track.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): At my constituency surgeries I regularly receive delegations from ethic minority groups, especially Kashmiri-Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups. They tell me that it is difficult for women to integrate and play a part in the community because they do not speak English, and that they are having terrible problems securing funding streams for the voluntary groups that are trying to help those women to speak English and become part of the community. Will the Minister tell us how that money can reach the front line? If she cannot do so today, will she meet a delegation from my community?

Ms Harman: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be examining those issues specifically. We need to ensure that women can work together to support other women in their local communities, and to support women taking up roles at work or in public life.

Mrs. Sharon Hodgson (Gateshead, East and Washington, West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for highlighting the Swedish model, and that country's treatment in law of prostitution. It criminalises the buyer, who is usually a man, rather than the seller, who is usually a woman, which is interesting in view of the fact that its Parliament is rather more representative than ours in terms of gender balance. I believe that the balance is almost 50:50, if not more. Does my right hon. and learned Friend see any correlation between those two facts?

Ms Harman: I think that women's representation in the Swedish Parliament means that an equal number of women and men have addressed the question of how to prevent women from being trafficked into Sweden and exploited for sexual purposes. The Swedes take the view that prostitution does not involve a working relationship, that it is not a job but sexual exploitation, and that in the 21st century we should hope for a better relationship between men and women than one based on men paying women for sex. I think that they have a point.

PENSIONS BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO.3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 83A (Programme motions),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Pensions Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 16th January and 18th April 2007 (Pensions Bill (Programme) and Pensions Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement at this day's sitting.

2. The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order, namely 15 to 24, 1, 12 to 14, 28, 2 to 11, 25 to 27, 29 to 73.

Subsequent stages

3. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

4. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement. —*[Mr. Michael Foster.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Pensions Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I draw the House's attention to the fact that privilege is involved in Lords amendments Nos. 1, 12 to 14, 16 to 18, 23, 24 and 27. If the House agrees to any of these Lords amendments, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the Journal.

New Clause

Lords amendment: No. 15, after clause 18, to insert the following new clause—*Financial assistance scheme: scheme manager.*

5.25 pm

The Minister for Pensions Reform (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we may discuss Lords amendment No. 16 and the Government motion to disagree thereto and amendment (a) in lieu thereof, and Lords amendments Nos. 17 to 24 and the Government motions to disagree thereto.

Mr. O'Brien: The Government have great sympathy for those who have lost pensions through no fault of their own. They saved in a pension scheme and deserve certainty in retirement. That is why the Government set up the Pension Protection Fund—to ensure that what happened to 125,000 people does not happen to others. That is also why we set up a more powerful pensions regulator, and it is why this Government—and this Government alone—thought it right to help people whose pension schemes failed in the past.

Many Members of both Houses believe that more help should be made available, even if it should come from the taxpayer. We have already significantly extended the financial assistance scheme, and we have amended the Bill to get more money to more people immediately after it is enacted—it increases the interim payments from 60 to 80 per cent. If the Bill's progress is delayed, that will delay payments to pensioners. We also set up the review of scheme assets, led by Andrew Young, the senior Government Actuary; and last week the Prime Minister reaffirmed our desire to lift assistance levels closer to 90 per cent. Following the publication yesterday of interim findings, I am optimistic that the Young review will help us to do that.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Gentleman allows me to say a little more and he wishes to intervene later, I will happily give way to him then.

The interim findings of the Young review strongly suggest that by making better use of assets within failed pension schemes we will be able to go beyond 80 per cent., and I am confident that we will be able to do so.

Our response to the interim findings constitutes part of our ongoing reconsideration of the ombudsman's first recommendations. As part of that ongoing reconsideration, I am delighted to be able to announce that the interim findings have persuaded us that more money can be made available. The findings of the asset review do not show that some more money should not be made available.

The Government believe that the cost of extending the FAS towards the 90 per cent. mark can now be met by making better use of the assets remaining in pension schemes, matched by a further contribution from the Government. To achieve that, we will need the co-operation of every pension scheme. The commitment that we are announcing today is to match the extra funds that the review identifies with the goal of moving towards 90 per cent. of expected core pension for all recipients.

Those extra funds will be based on the amount of assets remaining in schemes. Trustees must continue to act in their members' best interests, but we hope that they will now take the view that those interests might not be served by expending scheme assets on annuities. The Government will match the extra funds that the Young review identifies as and when they are released by trustees, and we expect that to be achieved as quickly as possible. We will write to trustees of the schemes concerned later this week to explain our proposals in more detail and to urge them to co-operate with us in getting a better outcome for all members.

I hope that that commitment will convince the House that the Government's intentions are genuine and that this group of costly, complex and contradictory amendments should not be supported. They could involve significant undefined Government spending and damage our ability to help those who most need it.

Mr. Waterson: I would not like the Minister's speech to get off on the wrong foot. Can he please clarify that there is a world of difference between a core pension and an expected pension, so talking about an expected core pension is a total nonsense?

5.30 pm

Mr. O'Brien: Some pension schemes start at 60 or another defined retirement age, but we have made it clear that the financial assistance scheme will start at 65. There are some other aspects of particular schemes, including lump sums and so on, that might have been funded out of some of the schemes had they been properly funded. We know that they were not properly funded, but the Conservative party appears to suggest that the taxpayer should fund a lot more—

Mr. Waterson *indicated dissent.*

Mr. O'Brien: It appears that the hon. Gentleman is not proposing that the taxpayer should fund such things. He suggests that it should be done, but he is not prepared to will the means to do it—*[Interruption.]* He accepts that he is saying that things should be done, but he is not prepared to put in place the means to do them. Well, as the Government, we need to ensure that what we promise we can deliver. The Opposition have shown, by the way in which they pursue these issues, that they will make all sorts of commitments but do not have the capacity to deliver on most of them.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister tell us how much money he is budgeting for the matching promise, which will be a welcome improvement?

Mr. O'Brien: It is the case that the DWP has within its funds sufficient money to be able to match fund the amounts that may come forward. It is a matched funding commitment and we expect that the Young review will identify some extra funding that will enable us to increase the amount of funding available for the pensioners. We have said that we will look at that issue, and our view is that we will be in a position to match demand in the approaching comprehensive spending review period and deliver the increase from existing departmental assets.

In terms of the Conservatives' approach, let us consider amendment No. 17, which would launch the Conservative lifeboat—it is in many ways an opportunistic attempt to generate party political controversy on this issue. The interim report of the Young review has, essentially, debunked the notion propagated by the Conservatives that there are large amounts of unallocated assets in pensions and insurance accounts waiting to be plundered. That means that the increased costs of the proposal—the Conservatives want to go right up to Pension Protection Fund levels—would inevitably fall on the taxpayer. That is a potential cost of almost £2.7 billion over the next 60 years or £640 million net present value. The Conservatives have made no real provision for that. They told us that it would cost the taxpayer nothing and could all be paid for by the supposed unclaimed assets.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the Conservatives were repeatedly warned by, for example, Lord Turnbull, who said that using unclaimed assets would represent

"a flagrant departure from the principle of evidence-based policy making."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 June 2007; Vol. 692, c. 1168.]

We now have the evidence from the Young review that shows this to be an uncosted amendment.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): Does not the review specifically exclude bank and building society account assets? Would they not make a big difference if brought within its purview?

Mr. O'Brien: The unclaimed assets in bank and building society accounts are not included in the review, but—my hon. Friend may have missed it—those funds have been allocated to young people. I hope that he or the Conservatives, given that their lifeboat has been sunk by the Young review, would not advocate that we should raid the boat of the young and take their assets. That money is spoken for and is going to young people. The Conservatives may be shifting their ground, but we must not rob our young people to pay the old.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I have two quick questions for the Minister. If his analysis is correct, why is the Young review continuing to look at the question of unclaimed assets? What is his assessment of the case study in appendix C of the review, which appears to set a clear precedent for recovering assets at a level more than sufficient to fund the lifeboat?

Mr. O'Brien: I notice that the Conservatives are apparently still claiming that there is funding in insurance and pension assets—or are they? It is not very clear what they are suggesting. The Young review said that it is very unlikely that those assets would lead to anything. Shall I read the foreword to the review? I do not want to risk embarrassing the hon. Gentleman.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): Go on, embarrass him.

Mr. O'Brien: I am being encouraged to embarrass the Opposition, but the Young review debunks the Conservative myth about pensions. Those involved in that review are continuing to look at the question of unclaimed assets, because that is what some people—including Opposition Members—have suggested. They do not think that that approach will lead anywhere, but they do believe that some of the assets in current pension funds should be aggregated. They believe that those assets could be sweated more efficiently, and combined so that annuities could be purchased in bulk, more money will be raised than was anticipated under the previous proposals.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: The Young review has made it clear that neither the national insurance fund nor national savings are credible options. It makes it clear that defined benefit pensions and orphan assets will not provide the new source of funding that is needed. The Opposition should accept that their lifeboat amendment has been holed below the waterline: it is sinking fast and the time has come for them to abandon it. Our charge that the Opposition are guilty of fiscal irresponsibility is plain to everyone.

Additionally, the Opposition proposal adds complexity as pensioners could receive income from three different agencies—their pension scheme, the FAS, and the lifeboat top-up. That would make for a mangled bureaucratic nightmare, caused by the Opposition. They complained about the FAS, but now it seems that they want to duplicate it. The real question is whether the Government will do more for people, and what we have said today shows that we are prepared to look at ways of moving forward. In contrast, the Conservatives have merely brought forward uncosted proposals.

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): As a former trade unionist, I know a good deal when I see one. I think that what the Government propose is a good deal for people who have lost their pension funds. Will my hon. and learned Friend remind us how much taxpayers' money is, quite rightly, being used to fund the Government's scheme? Will he assure me that payments will be speeded up, so that people receive some income as soon as possible? Finally, does he agree that Opposition Members have displayed a touch of opportunism with their amendment?

Mr. O'Brien: I agree that Opposition Members have displayed a touch of opportunism. The Young review has ably demonstrated the vacuity of their lifeboat proposal, which is going nowhere else but down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith) is right that there is concern about the speed at which some of the payments are being made. I acknowledge that we have spoken to some of the trade union organisations that want the payments to be speeded up. I went to York recently to talk to the people running the FAS operational unit about why there were such delays. One of the major problems has been getting the required information from trustees, some of whom are good at providing it and others are a bit slower, but others have taken the view, for legitimate reasons, that this is not the right time to provide the information. They have taken legal advice, considered it and come to the view that they do not want to give the information at present. A variety of reasons are involved.

I have looked at how some of the payments are being made and we stand ready to make payments as soon as the trustees decide that information should be forthcoming. Many more people are now receiving payments and we stand ready to make further payments as soon as possible. The money is there. We are ready to make the payments and when we get the information we shall do so.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I take my hon. and learned Friend back to his comments about the matched funding commitment? The message I seem to be getting from the review team's interim report is that there could be more money than was initially thought, including well over £1 billion in the assets of failed schemes. When my hon. and learned Friend talks about matched funding up to the level of the core pension, does he realise that above what is designed as core pension there are things such as widows and dependants' benefits? Can he assure me that he will not impose a limit by saying that those things will not be funded if it turns out that there is enough money from the other assets recommended by the review team and the matched funding commitment he made today?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We have to look at where we are going in terms of the Young review, which was asked to see how much we can sweat out of the assets. My hon. Friend is right to say that the amount in failed schemes is well in excess of £1 billion. That gives us a fair amount of resources and if we can aggregate them, bulk them up and bulk buy, we can certainly go beyond 80 per cent., as the Government have indicated. However, what I cannot tell my hon. Friend at present is how much will be available in terms of the Young review. The review needs to come to fruition and we need the report. It was scheduled for the end of the year, but I have asked for it to be brought forward to November so that we can see it earlier, because I am conscious that a large number of people are waiting on the outcome of the review.

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab): The Minister places great store by the initial comments of the Young review, but is he aware that in a similar review of unclaimed, orphan assets in banks and building societies in Ireland, it was originally predicted that after the searches had been fully conducted no more than €3 million was likely to be found, but in the event €196 million was found—60 times more than claimed? At this stage, is not it a bit premature to make a presumption that would close the door on the possibility of finding funds in the UK that diverged on a similar scale? Why is the Minister so keen to block off that route, which could get a lot of us off the hook?

Mr. O'Brien: With respect, I think that my hon. Friend is over-optimistic as a result of what happened in Ireland. Andrew Young and his colleagues are looking at a number of schemes and we are aware, broadly, of the amount in them. The question is whether we can more easily access those resources, get the trustees, under their legal terms, to bring the resources together and bulk them up, and then whether we can use them better to purchase annuities. That is the approach Andrew Young suggested. He is not optimistic about the view that we can identify vast other sums that would be easily available, so although I appreciate the situation in Ireland, the Young review does not suggest that it is anything like that in the UK.

5.45 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): The Minister has talked about sweating assets and bulking up the pot in the first instance, but when the Department for Work and Pensions does the calculation for FAS liability at the moment, it takes the expected pension, multiplies it by 80 per cent.—for the time being—and then reduces it by the notional annuity already produced by transferred lump sums that may have gone to individual scheme members. In the calculations that I have seen—I have an example here from the DWP—the rate of return on that lump sum is quite extraordinary, unsurprisingly leading to a zero FAS liability. Even if the annuities or transferred sums were aggregated, I find it almost impossible to believe that that total capital asset could be sweated any more than it is being at the moment. My instinct is that the end result, in terms of FAS liability, would be the same and the pension going to any failed scheme member would be the same. How does the Minister think that the Government, or another body, could sweat more out of those assets than is currently being done?

Mr. O'Brien: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read the report by Andrew Young. It bears reading through. It is complex, and involves a lot of issues, but the key point that it raises is that if one were able to bring together the assets in the various failed pension schemes, that would give one a greater purchasing power in the market. If one were able to put those assets into another annuity—a single annuity or a small number of annuities—that would increase the purchasing power of the amount of resources.

I am dealing with a report by the deputy Government Actuary, who knows his business. To some extent, we have to proceed on an evidence basis and the evidence that Andrew Young came up with, after talking to a large number of people in the industry, shows that it is possible to do more than we thought. I do not share the hon. Gentleman's pessimism, but if he asking me whether I can guarantee that all this can be done, I have to say that all I am relying on at the moment is that the Young review has done a considerable amount of work—it seems a very good job to me—and I hope that we will be able to get a genuine response from that.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): Has my hon. and learned Friend had time to assess whether, if it is possible to roll up those pension funds that have not yet annuitised, primary legislation will be required—particularly for those funds that are pretty close to annuitising—to prevent them from doing that at the moment, to provide a chance to see whether we can get a better deal for pensioners through the proposals in the Andrew Young report?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend raises an interesting and important point. As I have already indicated, we will suggest to the trustees of pension funds, who have their own legal obligation and will need to take their own legal advice, that they need to look carefully at this matter. If it is the case that bulking up the various funds would enable us better to bulk purchase annuities, that would on the face of it appear to be better for the members, and the trustees have to take that into consideration. In the end, we are going to have to rely on trustees to look at the facts, examine their fiduciary duty to their members and ensure that they make the right judgment. The important thing is that the Bill moves to Royal Assent, so that we can increase the level of initial payments, meaning that more people will benefit immediately. Those are tangible commitments by the taxpayer that will make a real difference to people's lives.

Amendment No. 24 is about the FAS being at Pension Protection Fund levels. The amendment does not disguise extra public spending as a lifeboat fund or pretend that unclaimed assets could get close to covering the costs. I admire its honesty, while questioning its effect. We estimate that moving from 80 per cent. on the FAS to PPF levels just like that would cost the taxpayer £2.7 billion, or £640 million, net present value. The cost would be low at first, but then rise rapidly as more people retired.

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I would like to make progress, because I have given way quite generously and I am conscious of the time. Other people want to speak and it is a time-limited debate, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman before I draw my remarks to a close.

We believe that the current FAS benefits of 80 per cent. are helpful, but that does not mean that we think that 80 per cent. is the most that people should get. That is precisely why we asked the assets review how we could get closer to a figure of 90 per cent. through better use of the funds held by qualifying schemes. Amendment No. 24 fails to take account of an essential difference between FAS and PPF payments. If FAS payments had to be equal to PPF payments, without account being taken of the pensions paid by schemes—that is what would happen under the amendment—some members would receive considerably more than PPF levels of benefit, because a member would receive 90 per cent. of their benefit from the FAS in addition to the pension that their scheme was able to pay them. I do not think that that was the intention of those who drafted the amendment; it is just poorly drafted, and I invite the House not to support it.

Let me turn to amendments Nos. 18 to 21 on the proposal to set up a pensions unclaimed assets recovery agency. As I have already said, the assets review exposes the Tory myth that additional spending commitments can easily be funded through unclaimed assets. That is confirmation of the powerful arguments made by Lord Turnbull, the Association of British Insurers and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who warned the Opposition repeatedly about their opportunism, and the lack of understanding unpinning the proposal. We are already exploring the potential of assets in failed pension schemes, and we have said that we will use them to supplement the FAS payments, if we can do so without incurring an unacceptable risk to the taxpayer.

The Opposition have raised false expectations about the assets that there might be, and setting up an agency of the kind proposed is likely to prove enormously expensive. The cost of setting it up could conceivably be more than the value of the assets; we just do not know. *[Interruption.]* Well, as far as I can see, it would probably cost more than the sum paid out, so we are probably looking at another £20 million or £10 million. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) chunters away on the Front Bench, but I ask him: what will it cost to set up the agency?

Chris Grayling: May I ask the Minister whether he is proud of the fact that his Department has presided over the setting up of a FAS that costs more to administer than it has paid out in pension payments so far? Is that not an absolute scandal and a disgrace, and is it not a sign of the failings of the Government?

Mr. O'Brien: I notice that rather than answer my question, the hon. Gentleman tried to bluster and attack. He can make his points about the FAS, and I will happily deal with them, but he is making another uncosted spending commitment. He does not know the cost of what he wants to do. He is making all sorts of commitments in order to score points. The Conservative party is the sort of party that makes such commitments, but basically it does not know what it is doing. Setting up such an agency is likely to prove enormously expensive, and amendments Nos. 18 to 21 are redundant as a result of the Young review. It is not sensible to try to guess what level of support could be funded. If we can bulk up assets and bulk-buy annuities, we are likely to be able to provide more support; we do not need to go down the route of setting up the pensions unclaimed assets recovery agency, which would be a rather strange body.

Danny Alexander: The Minister is on the important subject of costs, and he makes the point that it would cost £640 million, net present value, to provide PPF-level benefits to people who have an entitlement under the FAS. According to written answers received by my noble Friend Lord Oakeshott in the House of Lords, that would amount to £25 million a year for the next 10 years. To the victims of the occupational pension schemes that collapsed in so awful a manner, that seems a relatively small amount of money to pay to ensure that they get a fair and just level of benefit.

Mr. O'Brien: Obviously, the payments will be made over 60 years, and there will be a sort of bell curve; the amount paid out will start off quite low, and then get

pretty big. The hon. Gentleman should recognise that although there will be some smaller early payments, payments will increase as people start to retire. We will be a good way into those 60 years before we reach the point on that bell curve at which the payment levels come down. When he talks about £20 million a year over 10 years, he is being somewhat optimistic. We are looking at an amount just in excess of that over the next two or three years, but then the figure will start to rise.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and others on the Public Administration Committee are concerned about the fact that schemes with solvent employers are excluded from the FAS. That is a complex subject, so we asked those carrying out the Young review to come to a considered view on whether some schemes of that type should be helped by the Government, rather than the employer who made the pension promise. When we developed the FAS, we tried to ensure that taxpayers' money will not fund assistance where there is an employer who could or should take some responsibility, including in cases where there is a moral, if not a legal, obligation. However, we are aware that there may be some schemes that are currently not covered in which members face a comparable loss to others in similar circumstances.

I cannot provide an assurance that all schemes, irrespective of whether the employer is solvent, will qualify for the FAS. The review indicates that not enough information is available on the circumstances of schemes with solvent employers, and it has begun a data collection exercise that will inform its conclusions later this year. In the meantime, it would not be right to absolve employers or trustees from their responsibilities to members. Some of the schemes are still winding up, and scheme members are hoping to bring pressure to bear on employers, so that they make contributions to the fund. There would be little incentive for trustees rigorously to pursue such cases, or for employers to respond sympathetically, if the Government indicated that all the members were likely to be helped under the FAS.

In a number of cases involving FAS qualifying schemes, employers have gone beyond their legal obligations as a result of trustee persistence. Employers are extremely unlikely to be willing to reach into their pockets if the Government step into the breach in every case, regardless of the circumstances. I do not want to pre-empt the review and make any open-ended commitments involving taxpayers' money. We provisionally estimate that the cost of including solvent employer schemes would be more than £400 million, but frankly, we do not really know. We are trying to get more information. I understand the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase, but I will not sign a blank cheque for solvent employer schemes—as their number still needs to be established, we do not know the cost to the taxpayer, and there is still the possibility of employers being expected to make a contribution. That said, as he knows, a review is under way, and it will report later this year—in November, we hope. Also, there will be a further Bill on pensions, and that will enable such issues to be raised. Given the lack of information, given that we can gain further information by the end of this year, and given that there may be further opportunities to consider the matter later, I ask him to consider not pressing his amendment.

I shall move on as speedily as I can. We understand the thinking behind amendment No. 22, and that is why we commissioned the work of the assets review. In a statement this morning, I said that trustees should consider their approach to annuitisation, given the commitment that the Government have made, and at the start of my contribution I set out the further commitment that we made today. At this stage, it would not be desirable to compel trustees to a particular course of action, but they have heard what I said, and I ask them to take it into account. When they make annuitisation decisions, they will need to consider their legal advice, and how best they can serve their members.

Amendment No. 23 is on account payments. We may disagree about how to fund assistance, or about the level of assistance that should be paid, but we all agree that affected members should receive payments from the FAS as soon as possible. Amendment No. 23 would result in the opposite: it would threaten the timely delivery of assistance to qualifying members. That is my concern. To make the amendment work, hundreds of pension scheme administrators would have to administer what would, to them, be unfamiliar processes. They would expect to be paid for doing so, and that would further deplete the value of scheme assets available to members. That could lead to higher top-up payments, the cost of which would ultimately be borne by the taxpayer. Schemes that had already wound up and had no trustees would still have to rely on the FAS to make payments. To apply for loans, schemes must assess whether they could afford to make on-account payments, which would increase administrative costs and complicate administrative processes for them and for the FAS, further delaying payments and the completion of wind-ups. Ros Altmann herself has said that operating a scheme in line with the amendments would not be straightforward. On this occasion I am pleased to say that I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Altmann's prognosis.

The expertise for delivering FAS payments lies with the FAS operational unit. Where data are received from trustees, FAS payments are assessed within about a month. The amendment would mean even greater costs and fewer payments. Lords amendment No. 15 would transfer certain functions to the Pension Protection Fund. I have visited the FAS operational unit and discussed how payments are made. It told me that it is ready to make payments as soon as information is received. I accept the concerns that some hon. Members have expressed, but I am not in a position to make an announcement about the issue.

6 pm

Mr. Waterson: I appreciate that the report is hot off the press. Is it not inherent in the Young report that it would make sense to fold the administration of the FAS into the PPF itself?

Mr. O'Brien: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but if he spoke to the PPF members he would find that they would want an awful lot of reassurance before that was done. The pensions industry, too, would require a great deal of reassurance. If the Lords amendment were accepted, it would create a lot of concern in the City. We can see how the Conservative party is operating in relation to the issue if it is prepared to make decisions without consultation or without ensuring that people

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

who have to deal with those problems understand the full implications. If the measure were to be introduced, that would have to be done after appropriate consultation.

I have spoken at length, and this is a short debate, so I shall conclude. As all parties acknowledge, this is a difficult area and it is important we get it right, both for members who want certainty and security and for taxpayers, many of whom do not have defined benefit occupational pension schemes. The Young review remains our best option for reconciling the priorities of taxpayers and of members of those pension schemes. While a lifeboat fund is superficially attractive, it does not come with the necessary funding. Indeed, it is a sunken lifeboat after Andrew Young's review. We need to see if we can find a better way of dealing with the issue, and the Andrew Young report shows that there are such ways. It would be irresponsible and cruel of any Government to make promises not knowing where the money will come from to pay for them, so I will not do so.

The interim findings of the Young review are an excellent start. The further commitment that the Government have made today provides additional support for pensioners and shows that we are doing practical things to help them. The Opposition are making wild gestures without looking properly at funding. The Bill must be enacted without the Lords amendments because it will enable us to pay more in initial payments to more people immediately. We have already pledged to raise assistance to 80 per cent., to raise the cap and to get rid of the de minimis requirement. Pensioners are waiting for the money, and we are prepared to pay it to them. We have made a further commitment today. I want our commitments to be delivered, and I want the Young report to be delivered in November so that we have a better opportunity to deliver for pensioners. The Government have ensured that they are addressing those issues seriously, in marked contrast to the way in which the Opposition have behaved throughout.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I must correct the record in relation to the amendments in which privilege is involved. Privilege is involved in Lords amendments Nos. 1, 12 to 14, 16 to 18, 23, 24 and 73, but not Lords amendment No. 27 as previously stated.

Mr. Waterson: I welcome the Minister to our debates on the Bill. It might have helped if he had read the Young report and our amendments properly, but he is new to the job, so I shall try to help him. He spoke for nearly 40 minutes, and we have a total of only three hours to debate all the groups of amendments, so I shall try to do better than him. The next group of amendments is important to many people, including the Equal Opportunities Commission, and it would be a great shame if it was not possible to debate it, particularly as we have just heard a statement about priorities for women. It would show a very odd sense of priorities if the Government did not want to have time to debate the second group of amendments.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: May I protest a little? I accepted a lot of interventions to ensure that Members' questions were answered.

Mr. Waterson: I take the Minister's point, and he was characteristically generous in accepting interventions. Let us hope that his colleagues are sufficiently restrained so that we can get on to the rest of the business.

I should like to distance myself from Lords amendment No. 24, which was tabled by the Liberal Democrats in the other place. It is the only amendment that proposes to use extra taxpayers' money for the problem. May I right the wrong in the Minister's speech, as that is certainly not the intention in our package of amendments, which stand or fall together? It is an obvious analogy to make, but he said that the lifeboat was holed and was sinking. However, it is the pension victims who are already drowning—the Minister should remember that.

May I pay tribute to their Lordships for giving their support on a genuinely cross-party basis to the amendments, which collectively provide a lifeboat fund to help the victims? We will vote for them as a package. I am sure that I do not need to make the case for helping the 125,000 people who have lost their pensions, as the Minister conceded, through no fault of their own. They have made their own case through their courage, persistence and dignity. We have helped them to make that case in debate after debate and Question Time after Question Time.

In recent weeks, we have heard a great deal about the new Prime Minister's "moral compass". He has spoken endlessly of change, and promised an end to the culture of spin. Yet the reality has been more of the same. Over the past few days, the Government have been frantically spinning in the media that the amendments are flawed in some way, that the unclaimed assets do not exist and so on. The Prime Minister likes to claim, as the Minister did today, that as things stand under the FAS, the victims will receive 80 per cent. of their pensions. Indeed, he told GMTV recently:

"Every single one of the 125,000 will get back at least 80 per cent. of their pension."

We all know that that is wholly inaccurate and misleading. The new Secretary of State is clearly a fast learner. In his first appearance at the Dispatch Box, he confused "expected pension" with the Government-created concept of "core pension". He was at it again in *The Independent* today. He said:

"We believe we will be able to move the 80 per cent. guarantee"—

that is the word that he used—

"from the taxpayer further towards 90 per cent."

The Minister himself talked about the expected core pension, which is a ludicrous concept that puts together the expected pension—what people expect to receive—and the core pension, which is a construct of the FAS.

Only the other day, in unveiling his "Not the Queen's Speech", the Prime Minister referred to an unclaimed assets Bill to be introduced later this year. He challenged us to support it, but failed to make any connection between the use of those assets and helping the pensions victims. It is as if he wished they would disappear. Sadly some of them have done so, and some of them will. That 80 or 90 per cent.—of what is it 80 or 90 per cent.? The truth is that the FAS was set up in a hurry as a political expedient and was inadequately funded from the outset. It had to be set up in a different location with different staff almost to underline the

fact that it was always going to be the poor relation to the PPF. Then the Government had to invent the novel concept of the core pension to make it sound even remotely credible. What does that mean in practice?

The PPF includes some inflation linking; the FAS has none. The PPF pays from the scheme pension age, but the FAS only at 65. The FAS does not allow for tax-free lump sums, or ill health or early retirement benefits, except for the terminally ill. The FAS does nothing for dependent children and little for widows. So most victims subject to the FAS will be lucky to get half their expected pension, and many will receive far less.

If the era of spin is at an end, why will the Government or the Prime Minister not listen? They were found guilty of maladministration by the ombudsman. They decided to ignore constitutional law and practice by saying that it was Ministers' job to second-guess the ombudsman on those findings. The Select Committee told the Government that they were wrong. They ignored it. The European Court said that the Government were wrong. They ignored it, too. The High Court told them, so they decided to appeal.

Now, in an almost unprecedented move, the Select Committee has issued a report aimed directly at today's debate and giving guidance to hon. Members on how to vote. Reading between the lines, it is clear that when these matters were last debated in the Chamber, the able Chairman of the Select Committee felt that he was led up the garden path by the then Minister. The Select Committee supports the view that those who have lost pensions where a solvent employer has wound up the scheme should also be included. That is the purport of amendment (a). The Committee states that

"the losses suffered by scheme members are identical, whether or not an employer still exists."

That is the nub of Lords amendment No. 16.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although the proposal announced by the Minister with regard to a review must be taken seriously, that is a step backward from what was said by the former Minister in the House, when far greater emphasis was given to the need to protect those who were affected by schemes that were solvent? We therefore want meetings with the Minister. My constituent, Richard Nichol, and the people who fought valiantly on the matter will look to our Front-Bench team to help them in that, as they have already done.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. Yes, there was some lack of clarity—that is the most charitable way of putting it—about what the then Minister said in response to the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), as a result of which his amendment then was withdrawn. The hon. Gentleman is back for another bite at the cherry and I wish him well with that.

The Select Committee has some harsh words for the Government's current position on trying to force employers to do the decent thing. It says:

"the Government should not use the indigence and distress of those who have suffered considerable losses to try to blackmail them".

On the pensions lifeboat, the Committee could not be clearer in it support. It states that it supports

"the general principle that FAS benefits should be aligned to those in the PPF"

and it urges the Government to find ways of speeding up payment by the FAS. Amen to that.

Most unusually, in my experience, the Select Committee urges hon. Members to think carefully about using the Bill to get help to those who need it. It says:

"the House should consider any government assurances extremely carefully before it gives up this weapon."

Once bitten, twice shy.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): For the sake of accuracy, and as he is quoting us liberally, I am sure the hon. Gentleman would want to record the fact that we say:

"Any assessment of the increase in benefit"—

that is, from the review—

"can only be speculative. We do not have the expertise to comment on whether the proposals for a review of unclaimed assets stand a realistic prospect of success."

I am sure the hon. Gentleman meant to add that.

6.15pm

Mr. Waterson: I am sure that is right. I appreciate that it is not for the hon. Gentleman's Committee to make such judgments.

The centrepiece of the Minister's speech tonight—the lifeboat towards which he has been swimming for most of the evening so far, but making little progress—has been the Young report. I agree that it is a useful document, as far as it goes. It is, of course, an interim report and seems to have been rushed out in an attempt by Ministers to bolster their position on the Bill. There is clearly more work to be done by Mr. Young and his colleagues, and I think he accepts that. My overall mark so far is six out of 10—must try harder.

We welcome parts of the report. It is correct to conclude that the funds available for the victims can be boosted by not purchasing bulk annuities. That is not rocket science. We have been saying that for quite a long time and campaigners such as Ros Altmann for even longer, yet Ministers have taken no notice at all. I am pleased to see that in their response to the Young report, Ministers have finally seen the light. But there is a massive danger that faces us this evening. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Miss Begg) touched on it in her intervention. It explains why, forgetting all other arguments for and against, hon. Members in all parts of the House must support the amendments tonight.

As wind-ups of schemes proceed, many of the assets identified by Young could be dissipated by purchasing annuities in bulk before the review team produces its final report at year's end. We must not allow that to happen, or much of this will become academic. That is the aim of amendment No. 22.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Is there not a further danger in relation to the purchase of annuities? Recently, compared with previous years, annuities have been performing pretty poorly. They have not been giving annuity holders the income that they might have given, say, 15 years ago. Is that not a further concern for those with broken pensions? Are

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

they not also entitled to be concerned about what has happened to their additional voluntary contributions and about the sloth with which the Government have sought to mend the broken pensions? I am thinking particularly of my constituents who have seen their British United Shoe Machinery Ltd occupational pensions go down the Swanee, and have received little comfort from the present Prime Minister or the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for that intervention. I know that he has been a doughty campaigner for the British United scheme members who lost many of their pension rights. He is right about the annuities market. An interesting and thoughtful document was produced by the Treasury a few months ago on the subject.

Almost by definition, if pension funds are to be wound up without sufficient assets and the money is to be used to purchase annuities in bulk, the money will not go as far as it might otherwise do. We entirely agree with Mr. Young about that. Belatedly, the Government also seem to agree, but all the Minister can say, rather wetly, if he will forgive me, is that the trustees must take their own advice. It is little more than a nod and a wink, whereas amendment No. 22 would make it crystal clear that they must stop purchasing annuities in bulk for the foreseeable future so that we can get the money going through the system to help the people who need it most.

Danny Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is making a critically important point. If what the Minister said is to be taken at face value, surely at the very least the Government should be advocating voting for amendment No. 22 to stop the assets being converted into annuities, or the money that he hopes will come in November when the Young review re-reports might be unavailable because by then it will have been annuitised.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I repeat what I have already said. If hon. Members are oblivious to all the other arguments on the issue, this is the central argument that should make them vote for the amendments tonight, especially amendment No. 22.

It is good news, at least for the moment, that the report concludes that there are some £1.7 billion of uncommitted assets in FAS eligible schemes. We agree about making better use of those assets. And glory be! Young also concludes that there would be advantages in operating the FAS along the lines of the PPF. The Minister seemed a bit iffy about that, but I recall tabling amendments to the 2004 Bill, as it then was, proposing just that: a separate fund—it must be separate, for obvious reasons—for existing claimants, operated in parallel to the PPF and by the same people, using the same skills set. We have consistently argued more recently that the failing FAS should be scrapped as a separate entity and folded into the PPF administration, which has shown itself to be efficient and cost-effective under the leadership of Lawrence Churchill. However, one of the galling aspects of opposition is that being proved right all along is not good enough.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I really cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to get away with that. He has been saying all along that unclaimed personal pensions and life assurance policies would provide a lifeboat for the various pensioners. Will he now accept that Andrew Young's report, published yesterday, makes it clear that unclaimed personal pensions and life assurance policies have a very uncertain outcome and although they might theoretically provide a source of funding, there would be substantial administrative, legal and other difficulties behind such a scheme? In other words, what he kept saying was going to provide the answer in fact provides no answer at all.

Mr. Waterson: I can assure the Minister that I am not going to do what he did, which was just to pick out the bits of Young that helped his case and leave the rest. I will deal with that aspect in detail later, and if the Minister feels that I have fallen short he is welcome to intervene again.

It is a tragic lost opportunity that the Government have been so slow to consider unclaimed assets as a source for topping up assistance to the victims. We raised that during the passage of the Pensions Act 2004; the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) had raised it much earlier. The mantra from the Treasury at that time was always the same: "Just because these assets are unclaimed does not mean that they do not belong to somebody." Then suddenly the then Chancellor, now the Prime Minister, turned 180° and announced that he would be looking to use unclaimed assets, albeit for a different purpose.

The Government have made much mischief on this subject. They have sought to rely heavily on some comments—now overtaken by events—from their new best friends, the Association of British Insurers, attacking the possible use of trust-based pension assets. For the record, we accept what the ABI says on that specific category, but—this may be helpful to the Minister—nowhere in our amendments on the lifeboat fund do we seek to specify which unclaimed assets could be appropriate for this purpose. That would be left to regulation and to the Secretary of State, and, arguably, to the final Young report. No doubt that makes organisations such as the ABI somewhat uncomfortable. I can understand that, because its job is to look after the interests of the companies who are its members. However, that does not alter the fact that in different ways, and for varying purposes, both Government and Opposition are looking to turn unclaimed assets to the benefit of people in our community who need help. I suspect that now the ABI's greater concern is the briefing from Government sources over the weekend suggesting that as part of the ongoing review they were going to look seriously into using the inherited estate of insurance companies—said to amount to some £20 billion.

The Young report avoids the issue of bank and building society assets because, it says, those are being considered by the Treasury, but we can safely assume, for these purposes, that significant amounts of money are available from those sources. Young goes on to deal with some ideas that have certainly not emanated from us, such as windfall taxes or additional levies on business. Perhaps they came from the Liberal Democrats. With wry amusement, I see that Young concludes that voluntary contributions from business are not

"a credible source of additional funding".

We said that when it was mooted by the then Pensions Minister back in 2004. The report dismisses somewhat tersely the use of unclaimed assets held by National Savings and Investments, and we would wish to look at that again as part of the group's ongoing work.

Rob Marris: Can the hon. Gentleman distinguish between orphan assets, which have been much talked about in this Chamber for all kinds of pet projects over the years, including for youth provision, and what is commonly termed the inherited estate? I have a life assurance policy that will not pay out what it was expected to, yet the company has inherited estate assets which could be divided between shareholders and policyholders, such as myself and my wife. I do not want the hon. Gentleman coming along, as a result of these amendments or regulations consequent upon them, and nicking money that could come to me as a policyholder.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, which was as penetrating as ever. I think he should be more worried about what his own Front Benchers have in mind, given the briefing over the weekend. He is absolutely right. The insurance companies argue that those funds are available to improve the lot of policyholders such as himself and his good wife. At least one or two companies are considering court applications—it must ultimately come down to that—to divide the booty between policyholders and shareholders. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris) says from a sedentary position that I want to take it. He needs to read what has been said over the weekend, which suggests that his own Government are thinking of taking it.

Mr. O'Brien: Before the hon. Gentleman makes an allegation like that, he should remember that it is precisely these sorts of funds that he and his colleagues have been saying are unclaimed assets in insurance and pension funds. We have repeatedly warned him, and he has been warned by others, that they are not available, yet now he is trying to claim that the Government want to access them. The Government have never made any such claim—it has always been made by the Opposition.

Mr. Waterson: I think that the Minister is failing to distinguish between the inherited estate of insurance companies and unclaimed pension assets. However, I will come to that in a bit more detail in a moment.

Alan Simpson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Waterson: I should like to make a little progress.

The report goes on to talk of the need for primary legislation to enable unclaimed assets to be utilised. We now know, fortuitously, that the Government intend to introduce an unclaimed assets Bill, for the Prime Minister has told us so. Should the amendments fail in due course, that would be a golden opportunity to remedy the situation. Perhaps the Minister could deal with that when he responds. We are heartened that the report concludes:

"there may be additional funds available in further types of unclaimed assets and the Review team will investigate these further before our final report is produced."

The Minister is wrong to say that the interim report closes the door on the use of unclaimed assets. I note that the review team is intending to continue to investigate the legal and other issues surrounding unclaimed assets, although they reach some provisional conclusions on unclaimed defined benefit scheme assets and so-called orphan assets. Like the Government, we shall consider the implications of those provisional findings. For those who favour the use of unclaimed assets, there is real encouragement in the report—the Minister clearly did not get as far as annexe E—as regards the experience in the Republic of Ireland. A comparison with what it achieved scaled up for our larger population suggests that we might generate £234 million in the first year and £70 million a year thereafter. The report is a good start to the process, and we are told that the final version will appear before the end of this year.

In fact, however, this is all beside the point. I had harboured hopes, based on my respect for the new Secretary of State and the new Pensions Minister, that they would come to these issues with fresh minds. The history of the FAS since its birth in May 2004 has been a dismal disappointment. Things have merely gone from bad to worse. In its annual report, it revealed that it spent more on running itself than it got to the victims. The latest number receiving payments—about 1,300—is only a fraction of the 10,000 who have reached retirement age and need help now.

Let us consider the appalling case of Mr. John Brooks, a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, who has been deeply involved in his case. Mr. Brooks is 68 and suffers from leukaemia. He worked for 38 years for Early's blanket factory in Witney, but when the business collapsed in 2002 he was left without a company pension. He is one of about 50 people in the same situation. He was recently contacted by the FAS, which offered him 60 per cent. of his full pension in the form, at least initially, of a loan. He said that he would not accept it because he wanted to know if the other 49 people were being offered the same thing. He then got a phone call from someone at the FAS. What he said is quoted in the *Oxford Mail*:

"I asked him if anyone else from Early's was being offered money and he said no, you are the squeaky wheel that we have got to grease."

That sums up not only the gross incompetence of the FAS, but its lack of any kind of moral status in carrying out the proper compensation of these victims.

6.30 pm

There are others, such as the Cheshires. Marlene Cheshire, the widow of David Cheshire, contributed to the Dexion scheme for 30 years. He died of cancer in 2005. He could have taken early retirement, instead of retiring at the normal age of 62. His widow will receive just £56.98 a week from the FAS, but he would have expected her to receive an estimated £113, including indexing. Mr. Andrew Parr, a member of the ASW Sheerness scheme, will receive 40 per cent. of his expected pension from the FAS. At the age of 62, he should have been getting £336.96 a week—he will now be getting just £134 a week, and he is still working despite having a heart problem.

It is not just a matter of statistics, but of real people facing real problems. When will Ministers understand that those people and their families need help now? The niceties and technicalities of sorting out underutilised remaining assets in the funds, non-purchase of annuities and unclaimed assets will take time; we accept that. However, if the Government had listened to us, that could all have been happening during the past two or three years. It is precisely because the process will take time, and because those families need help now, that along with other parties and some Labour Members, we are proposing not just a lifeboat fund but that initial funding should be provided through Treasury loans. Those would be repaid in due course and are based on the way in which the Maxwell victims were treated.

Rob Marris: What these people have gone through is awful; we are all aware of that. In the figures that the hon. Gentleman has given, he says that individuals will receive 40 per cent. rather than 80 or 90 per cent. Is he committing his party to pay the full 100 per cent. of expected pensions, and if so, what would that cost the Government?

Mr. Waterson: We are committed to find ways, as set out in the amendments, to ensure that people receive compensation at PPF levels, without incurring further taxpayers' money, and we think that the Government should be doing that as well. That is why we have suggested that we all talk to each other on a consensual basis to try to reach a solution.

I mentioned the question of loans, the Treasury and the parallel with the Maxwell situation. The then Conservative Government got their priorities right. In due course, they sorted out pensions reform through what became the Pensions Act 1995, but their priority in the short term was to get help to those who needed it because they were facing destitution.

With the exception of the Minister, we have all dealt with these issues of improvement and changes to the FAS before, over and over again, and the Government have been dragged kicking and screaming each time to make further concessions. On past form, Ministers will relent and agree with us sooner or later. Why not sooner?

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I ask you a rhetorical question? Are you, like me, visited by the odd nightmare? That nightmare is one in which one knows the right course of action, but is paralysed to take it. All of a sudden, one wakes up and finds oneself back in the real world. Listening to what was said from our Front Bench today, the comparison with being paralysed and unable to take the right action seemed to be there. The nightmare, however, is visited not on us, but on those of our constituents who have paid into an occupational pension for most, if not all, of their working lives, and have been robbed of that to some degree—sometimes to a great degree.

Let me remind the House of the background to this matter. In 2002, I introduced a Bill that had two parts. One was to establish an insurance scheme, and one was to deal with what we then thought were small numbers of people who could not be insured because their schemes had already gone bankrupt, or would do so before the insurance scheme came into existence. I proposed that taxpayers should not have to foot a penny of the bill of making good the pensions of those in the second group, and that we should draw upon the unclaimed assets of banks and building societies.

What was the Treasury's response to that? It told us that, although these assets were unclaimed, it did not mean that they did not have owners. The Treasury was not minded to claim such assets, which sometimes were unclaimed for 100 years or more, to foot the pension bill of those who had so cruelly lost out. We now know that the Treasury says not only that the assets will be claimed by the Government, even though they are unclaimed and may have owners, but that pensioners will not have the first claim on them, as first mentioned in this House. Instead, the assets will be used for youth projects. It is not that anyone in the House is against financing youth projects, but we think—as Aneurin Bevan said—that politics is about priorities, and when it comes to priorities, pensioners should be at the top of the list.

The Minister for Pensions Reform is one of our most adroit performers at the Dispatch Box, but at the end of his contribution, I was left wondering what we were offering pensioners. All I knew was that we were not offering them the deal that we should be. Tonight, we should take the opportunity to put an end to the nightmare into which they have been plunged for many a long year. Those on the Treasury Bench know that we have by-elections coming up. Lots of Members on this side of the House, who agree with us in spirit, will not want to be with us in the Lobby because they know that some Opposition Members would exploit that in by-election campaigns.

I hope that Members of the House of Lords would not misread a vote as a lack of determination on this side of the House. When our deliberations return to them, I hope that they maintain their position, and keep sending the measure back to us until we reach the final tape. At that point, the Government will have to give way, if they have not already done so, and we will get justice, at long last, for those pensioners who have been so cruelly treated by the circumstances regarding their pensions funds. All of a sudden, the light of day will then be upon the Government, and they will realise that the funds can be found from somewhere. We might as well do that tonight rather than later on in the Session. We owe that to our constituents, and I hope that we shall vote accordingly tonight.

Danny Alexander: I was struck by the—probably uncharacteristic— partisan tone struck by the Minister in his opening remarks. There has been a lot of talk about building a pensions consensus during the debates on pensions that many of us have been involved in. During this debate, the House has to think about the cross-party interest of many hon. Members in ensuring that the 125,000 victims of the collapsed pensions to which the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) referred, have a fair and just settlement. We have an opportunity tonight to ensure that they do, and to ensure that the paralysis, quite rightly described by the right hon. Gentleman, stops and the nightmare for those 125,000 people is brought to an end. Let us ensure that those people are not presented with continuing injustice and a continuing struggle.

Let us not forget that what has brought the matter most vividly to the House's attention for a period of years was vigorous campaigning. We saw it again today, as many of the victims of collapsed occupational pensions were present in Parliament square, to lobby Members of this House about the justness and fairness of their cause. Let us not say to those people, "You have to keep struggling on." Let us back the amendments and make sure that those people have the fair and just settlement that they seek, and which they deserve. That settlement is embodied by the amendments, including amendment No. 24, which I shall come to shortly.

The background to the matter is well known. As the right hon. Gentleman said, many people have been affected during the period between the suggestion of such legislation and its coming into law. The Government's role in the whole sorry scheme has been criticised by several independent bodies, such as the European Court of Justice, the High Court, the pensions ombudsman and the Select Committee on Public Accounts. If a footballer had been shown four red cards in succession, the police would be called to get him off the pitch. The Government need to respond with more alacrity to those findings than they have displayed so far.

Jenny Willott (Cardiff, Central) (LD): Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that, although the Government finally appear to have accepted some guilt for maladministration after the attempts by the four different bodies that he mentioned, they are still not putting right the financial injustice?

Danny Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention and pay tribute to her work in campaigning for her many constituents who have been affected by the problems. I share her surprise that, although the Minister appeared to offer a further small concession, albeit with few numbers attached, he was not willing to go the whole hog. I share the view of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) that the Government will eventually be forced to do that. They have not done so yet, and that is gravely disappointing.

Although I acknowledge that the Government have made progress in expanding the FAS from its original limited basis to a slightly less limited basis—and, potentially, an even less limited basis—they seem to have been dragged kicking and screaming to that point. Any resultant positive feeling among the victims of the scandal has been dissipated by the Government's niggardly approach to making progress. There is genuine anger about that. I went to the demonstration in Parliament square today and saw many people wearing T-shirts, which claimed that the Chancellor of the Exchequer "stole my pension". That shows the extent to which the issue arouses genuine and justifiable anger.

The anger derives from the big difference between the PPF and the FAS. The Minister used the phrase "core pension". He has now invented a new phrase—"expected core pension". Others have drawn attention to the fact that the term "core pension" is misleading and appears to have been defined uniquely for the purposes of the debate to make it sound as if more is being offered to the people who are affected. All hon. Members should bear that in mind when they cast their votes.

Sir John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will also realise that the suggestion that a loan somehow reflects what happened in the Maxwell case is factually inaccurate. There was initially a Government loan, but nearly all the assets were subsequently recovered or squeezed out of the banks that had lent against them, so there was not a huge debt to be repaid at the end of the day.

Danny Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The amendments' point is to say, "Let's get on with it. Let's get the Government loan through the system to achieve the PPF level, not the more niggardly proposal." We can then ascertain the resources that can be released through the Young review process and other processes, and calculate how much of that money the Government can get back.

The Minister is dithering about the financial outcome for the affected pensioners while saying, "We must wait and see." There must be an end to the dithering. The House and the pensioners who suffered the injustice have waited a long time and consistently demanded PPF level benefits.

My party made it clear in our election manifesto that we believe that benefits should be paid at the PPF level. I previously referred to the figure that House of Lords written answers provided for the cost of that. At net present value, the cost would be £640 million in the first 10 years. That is £25 million a year and, as the Minister said, there is a curb. Perhaps I should not be, but I am prepared to take on trust the word of his colleague in the House of Lords for the correctness of those figures.

The difference between the PPF and the FAS is great. The 80 per cent. that is currently being offered amounts to only 60 per cent. when we consider expected pension, according to the pensions action group. That is because, unlike the PPF, the benefits paid out under the FAS have no index inflation linking. Other benefits, such as widows' benefits, are more limited under the FAS than they are under the PPF. Other dependants' benefits are non-existent. The FAS pays out at the age of 65, irrespective of the retirement age of the individual's scheme.

Even if the Minister goes up to 90 per cent. of his "expected core pension", it will amount to perhaps only 65 per cent. of actual expected pension—that is, two thirds of the sum to which people would have been entitled had their schemes not collapsed. Hon. Members should bear that in mind when they cast their votes this evening.

6.45 pm

The core pension concept, which was invented for the purposes of the scheme, varies a great deal according to individual circumstances. I met one pensioner today who told me that his personal circumstances meant that his core pension amounted to 32 per cent. of his expected pension. There is a wide difference, which means that the Government's talk of 80 or 90 per cent. is simply not in keeping with many affected pensioners' individual circumstances.

The PPF method of delivering benefits gives a great deal more certainty and we should aim to achieve that.

Jenny Willott: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that my constituents who are affected are mainly people who worked in the former steelworks and were not on especially high incomes when they were employed? Their expected pension was not generous in the first place and getting two thirds of that can mean a small amount on which to live in retirement. That has implications for pensioner poverty.

Danny Alexander: I agree with my hon. Friend. Many of the 125,000 people whom we are discussing this evening are in the position that she describes. We are not considering pensioners who are expecting—as Cabinet Ministers might expect—large sums in retirement, but people who built up small amounts of pension. We should record our indebtedness to the pensions action group, and especially to Dr. Ros Altmann, for the way in which they assiduously brought such matters, including my hon. Friend's point, to the House's attention.

The Minister referred to the Young review. It is an interesting document, which rewards further detailed study—I am sure that all hon. Members have studied it. It includes much that should give aid and comfort to those who support the amendments. For example, it emphasises the importance of stopping the annuitisation of the assets that are left over in the collapsed pension schemes. That is precisely the outcome that amendment No. 22 would achieve. The Minister wants to wait until November, when I presume that we will have the next phase of the report. Who knows how much longer Government action will then take? It could be attached to another pensions Bill. The process could take some time. If, during that time, many of the assets are annuitised, the benefits that could accrue to the FAS will be lost. Even if the Minister rejects all the other amendments—I wish that he would not—amendment No. 22 is in his interests as much as those of everyone else who pursues the matter.

I fail to understand the basis of the Government's opposition to the proposals. Although the amount of money required to increase benefits to PPF level—£640 million at net present value—is significant, it is not a great deal of money in overall annual public expenditure terms. I cannot understand why Ministers are so unwilling to do the right thing by a group of pensioners who have been treated so unjustly.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: The hon. Gentleman will agree that the Young review tells us that, of the £1.7 billion in assets that have been identified, £1.3 billion has not yet been committed to annuities. That is why we must act this evening.

Danny Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is right. "Action this day" must govern us. It is not enough to delay a little more and simply take the Government's word. The Select Committee gave cautious advice about the extent to which we should listen to the Government. We need to act now because, tomorrow, the amount that has been annuitised may be greater. The next day, it may be greater still. We need to act to ensure that that does not happen and that the maximum amount of resources is available to benefit those who have suffered so long because of the collapse of their occupational pension.

The Young review makes the point—perhaps it is a rebuttal to the Association of British Insurers, among others—that there are unclaimed assets potentially available in life insurance policies. However, the main point the review makes is that there is a need to create the lifeboat now. People need the guarantee of the benefits at PPF level. The Minister can have a review to ascertain the level of resources, but let us get the lifeboat going to give people outside the certainty that they require.

Amendment No. 24 is simple and makes it clear that PPF-level benefits should be delivered by regulation as a matter of right. The other amendments make it clear that the process of allocating resources should be gone through, but the uncertainty of the level of resources that might be delivered by the various programmes should not stop us voting for these amendments. There may be a small cost attached—the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris) has referred to it repeatedly, from a sedentary position and otherwise—but answers to parliamentary questions show that it is not great. Let us float that lifeboat now to give hope to all concerned.

The Minister presented his statement as an attempt to offer progress but it amounted to little more than more dithering and delay. Victims of this scandal cannot wait and, with the exception of those to whom the hon. Member for Eastbourne referred who have sadly passed away, they will not go away. They will knock at our door every day they can. That is another reason why the House should act today. The amendments establish the lifeboat and start the search for the resources to fund it. That is the right order in which to do it. Let us not spend weeks, months or years reviewing the assets that might be available before we decide to float the lifeboat and give the guarantee of the appropriate level of benefits. Let us vote for the amendments tonight.

The Prime Minister has made clear his wish to present an ethical dimension to his Government's domestic policy. What better way to start than to ensure that the amendments are passed tonight and that the victims of collapsed occupational pensions in the FAS get the levels of benefits that they desire? The Prime Minister has also made it clear that he wishes to restore the role of Parliament. What better way could there be for the House to show that if the Government are not willing to provide that ethical dimension to their domestic policies, then it is? I hope that the House will support the amendments.

Dr. Tony Wright: My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) mentioned the word "justice", which is the right word. Fundamentally, we all have to decide whether we want to do justice to a group of people who, through no fault of their own, lost their occupational pension scheme. Either we do, or we do not. The Government certainly want to help them and today's announcement is welcome. I am not sure whether it is the fourth or fifth extension of the original FAS scheme; I do not disparage that, and it is welcome. We have travelled a long way, but we have not yet arrived at a position of justice. For all the reasons that we have rehearsed endlessly, there is still a big gap between what we think these people should get, as

under the PPS, and what they will get, even under a more generous FAS. That is and always has been the fundamental point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) asked the Minister a very good question: was the 90 per cent. core pension entitlement now seen as a ceiling, or as the review continued and assets were discovered would there perhaps not be a ceiling? Might we go as far as we could to get some sort of parity with the PPF? I was not sure what the answer was; perhaps the Minister was not sure. I hope that he will become more sure as it would be helpful to have the answer.

We have made awfully heavy weather of this matter. Many of us simply wanted to vote at some point for a proposition that said that some public money would have to be spent in order to do justice. The Government began by saying that it was not a question of money. As we have finished, we see that it is entirely a question of money. The official Opposition said that they wanted to see justice done, but did not want to spend any public money up front. It would have been better to say, "There is cost involved in doing justice, but it is justified." This involves the whole House because both main parties are part of the story as to how we have got here and there is a collective responsibility on the House to put this right.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I support my hon. Friend. The amount of public money involved has been estimated at £20 million for the first year, although it might rise beyond that. The amount of money that we lose every year from tobacco smuggling alone is £2.5 billion, more than 100 times that amount. There is also VAT carousel fraud and mistakes in benefits. Hundreds of millions, if not billions, of pounds are lost or wasted every year—money that could easily pay these tiny amounts of money.

Dr. Wright: As ever, my hon. Friend and fellow Select Committee member makes telling points.

I would have preferred us to address this matter in a more direct up-front way. We did not, and we now have to do it through an indirect route of a loan and the expectation that assets will be recovered. If that is the way to get the commitment, let us have it by that route; it is better than no route at all.

The Select Committee has become preoccupied with the solvent employer schemes. We have had continuing dialogue with the Government on that and while it may seem arcane to some, people who have lost their pension in those schemes are in exactly the same position as those in all the other schemes. The Government have said that they are prepared to help members of schemes where trustees have agreed to a compromise agreement with employers because the alternative would have been to force the employer into insolvency, but they have not addressed the position, despite much prompting, of those whose schemes were closed before June 2003. That is an important date; it is when schemes could be closed without funding full buy-outs.

The Government, rightly, have repeatedly refined the rules governing the closure of pension schemes, and after 11 June 2003 employers were allowed to close their pension schemes only if they provided a full buy-out value for both those receiving pensions and scheme members who had not yet reached pensionable age. However, before that date employers were able to close company pension schemes provided that certain funding requirements were met. There was no question of trustees being able to prevent it.

7 pm

We asked the Government directly whether it was correct that until 11 June 2003, it was legal for employers to close a pension scheme funded to the minimum funding requirement level even if the benefits promised could not be secured; and, if so, whether trustees or scheme members would have any legal means by which they might ensure full benefits were paid. The Government said:

> "No legal recourse would be available in relation to the employer debt legislation for pre 11 June 2003 wind-ups, if solvent employers had met their legal obligation to pay the debt calculated in accordance with the legislation."

We know now that the Government and the regulator are considering what more can be done to compel employers. However, it is okay for the Government to talk about the need to compel employers and to talk about their moral obligation, when they clearly do have a moral obligation. There has been deplorable behaviour, but the point is that what was done was legal. For the members of the schemes, the effect is just the same—they have lost their pensions. That is the point from which we should start.

Amendment (a), which reflects the continuing discussion that we have been having with the Government about the importance of the sequence of events and the dates, is intended to secure support for those who suffered because of the inadequate legal framework before June 2003. My amendment answers completely the Government's worry that somehow the floodgates will be opened and they will not be able to exercise moral suasion on employers. There is none of that, because it simply establishes the legal position. After that date, the Government are right that there is a case for supporting only schemes where the trustees correctly decided that compromise was in the best interests of members. Before that date, compromise, as I understand it, was not a relevant consideration.

The question to be decided now is whether we simply trust to the process that is under way—I understand that the Government want that and have moved in that direction. They have said that we can always take care of such issues through secondary legislation. However, it is only now that we can ensure, through primary legislation, that the solvent employer schemes are brought within the FAS. I accept the Government's worries about opening the floodgates; but in that case they should bite the hand off with amendment (a), which would give them a circumscribed statement of the kind of schemes that should be properly brought inside the FAS. It is on that basis that I shall be asking the House to support it.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): I am particularly honoured to follow the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), who is Chairman of the Public Administration Committee. His argument about the moral imperative to do something for pensioners who have lost their pensions through no fault of their own is, along with his other arguments, absolutely right. I do not intend to take up too much of the

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

House's time, because as hon. Members will know there is other business in this group of amendments that is also important, particularly to women. It would therefore be helpful to conclude these arguments quickly.

However, I have a particularly good example from my constituency of the injustice of the current arrangements. I represent two groups of people who have lost their pensions: those scheme members who worked for United Engineering Forgings, the old steel company that collapsed before the Pension Protection Fund came into being, and who therefore have to rely on inadequate compensation from the financial assistance scheme; and the people who used to work for the old Rover car company. Although they lost their jobs in the collapse of that company, mercifully that happened days after the Pension Protection Fund came into being, so they were not in the appalling situation of losing both their jobs and the pension contributions that they had made over the years working for that company.

There are other companies that I might mention, such as Kalamazoo. It would be helpful to put on the record my appreciation for the efforts of Mr. Peter Wheeler from Kalamazoo, who has been one of the major campaigners in getting the Opposition and Government Members focused on the issue, as well as the Government. There is also Turner and Newall, which is another company in our region whose employees have included constituents of mine who have lost their pension provision.

The situation is simple. Those people did absolutely the right thing. They did what society asked of them, what their families asked of them and what the Government could ask of them. Those people sought to look after themselves by forgoing income that they could have spent today, in order to look after themselves and their families in the future. In that sense, the House surely owes it to them to put together a scheme that compensates them for doing what we could ask of them, but which many others do not do. We have a moral imperative to try to protect those people in their predicament, now that they have lost their pension savings.

That is particularly urgent, given that many of the people who have lost their pensions and who have looked to the financial assistance scheme have either died while waiting for the money to be forthcoming or become much more ill or retired, while remaining in a penurious position. It is simply not fair that that group of 125,000 people, whose numbers will not grow, because of the existence of the Pension Protection Fund, should find themselves in the particularly injurious position of not being properly compensated for the loss of pension savings that they made in the past.

The words of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) were particularly accurate. The Government could have done something about the problem years ago and saved people from that predicament because they had the assets of banks and building societies, which they could have plundered to protect those people and offer them compensation. However, the Government made a distinct decision to spend that money on something else. Although provision for young people in our communities is welcome, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the priority should have been those people who had done the right things by themselves and society. They deserved to be compensated.

It is not good enough for the Government to um and ah, and to keep giving the House a little bit more, in an attempt to buy off any opposition to their plans. They could have dealt with the situation some years ago, but they chose not to do so. However, the House will not let the issue go. I applaud the willingness of Labour Members to put the issue on the table and say that the Government must come forward with proper compensation that matches the protection offered by the Pension Protection Fund, because that is the right thing to do.

I agree with Opposition Members in general that the urgency of the current situation is paramount. We must prevent the £1.3 billion that has been itemised in the Government-commissioned report from being made into annuities, by passing a law in the House today. We must also force the Government's hand into looking again at offering full compensation, whether through the lifeboat fund or through an alternative scheme that the Government have in mind. Frankly, it does not matter to my constituents; what matters to them is seeing justice done. The justice that is acceptable is to have parity with the Pension Protection Fund. I urge the Minister to listen to the pleas of the House and do just that.

Alan Simpson: I would like to address some of the misleading arguments that have been used to try to create a case for rejecting the Lords amendments.

I begin with the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made. It is just not true that the Young review has sunk the lifeboat argument. His own experience, in floating the argument in the first place, was to be met by direct Treasury opposition, which sought to block a claim that unclaimed assets could be used to meet a public good. The situation now is that the Treasury has changed its position. It has decided not only that those funds can be used, but that it will decide—or has decided—what the public good should be in this case. Saying that someone has pinched the lifeboat is quite different from saying that someone has sunk it. If the lifeboat has been pinched, it is perfectly legitimate for the House to pinch it back and put it on a proper course again.

It would be terrible to suggest that the Young review was the basis on which the claims of the old were to be rejected. I suspect that, if we were to widen the remit of the Young review, that is not a claim that he would make either. The terms set for him specifically involved looking at pension scheme assets, not at those of banks and building societies. It is therefore implausible to say that, on the basis of an area that he has been precluded from considering, he has concluded that there is no case for supporting a lifeboat fund.

Let us think about that for a moment. The reality is probably that a significant proportion of funds accrued as banks' and building societies' unclaimed assets have come from people who have died without an estate to pass their savings on to. The majority of those people will be older, rather than younger. Let us try to project ourselves into the minds of such people and ask whether, on their death-bed, they would be more likely to have said, "Give it away to the kids" than "Give it

away to my mates. Make sure that people of my generation don't live in poverty as a result of my dying with an estate that isn't able to make use of my savings." It is morally implausible to claim that it is unacceptable for the House to decide that pensioners have a prior claim to those orphan assets.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am not sure that it is reasonable to speculate on people's dying wishes. Many elderly people are just as concerned about the needs of the young people in our society. The fact is, however, that the sums involved are relatively small, and if the Government wanted to deal with this matter, they could do so. The Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor, would often pull a rabbit out of the hat and spend lots of extra money, to cheers on the Labour Benches. Surely we ought to cheer if he were to find the £25 million or so a year to deal with this problem.

Alan Simpson: That is absolutely right. The sums involved are relatively small in the context of any of the major functions of the Government Departments. It cannot be beyond the wit or the financial reach of the House to say that we could provide those resources up front to ensure that the lifeboat floats, and that it sails in the right direction.

I want to make a brief point about the insurance companies. We have all received letters from the Pru, lobbying us and saying that such action would be robbing Peter to pay Paul. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) mentioned a company scheme that had collapsed. The company was UEF. She could have gone on to say that UEF was owned by the Pru. The Pru has not paid out a penny to help the pensioners who lost their pensions in a scheme that it owned.

The insurance industry is terrified that the House could take a decision to hold a wide-ranging investigation into the scale of the assets that it is sitting on, and that we would find a legitimate case for saying that it should have been paying out from those assets. It is terrified that, were we to hold such an investigation, we would discover that it is sitting on shed loads of money that ought, quite properly, to be part of the subject of this House's decision making. This is a fundamental decision about democracy. It is a question whether the House has the right and the courage to hold such an investigation, come back with conclusions and to make decisions on an informed basis. To rule out our right to hold such a wide-ranging investigation is an insult to ourselves as much as to the pensioners who are pleading for us to take action on their behalf.

7.15 pm

Although I sort of welcome moves in the direction of the payments of 80 per cent. and 90 per cent. of core pensions, the reality is that the 90 per cent. will not turn out to be 90 per cent. any more than the 80 per cent. turned out to be 80 per cent. The idea of core pensions involves taking the member's expected pension, deducting all the inflation linking, some of the revaluation, the tax-free lump sum, some widow's benefits and the ill health benefits, and then calculating 80 per cent. of the resulting figure. A further 22 per cent. is then deducted as tax at source to get to the final figure. And this is calculated only from the age of 65, not from the scheme pension age.

That is why Members are correct in saying that many of the scheme-affected members who are included in the FAS will struggle to get 50 per cent. of their expected pension. Those pensioners assail us in Parliament square and on the streets of our constituencies with the absurdity of the claim that they will somehow get 90 per cent. of their core pension; they will get only a sliver of their real entitlement.

Mr. Frank Field: Can my hon. Friend imagine what the reaction in the House would be if our pension scheme went belly up and our expectations of a modest retirement were ripped away from us? Would the House be this empty, or would all the Benches be overflowing with anger?

Alan Simpson: I am a huge admirer of my right hon. Friend, but he sometimes steals my final lines. This is kind of difficult, because that was going to be my concluding point. Were Members of this House to be told that, despite our contributions to our final salary scheme pensions, we were not going to receive the full entitlement that existed on paper, and that we ourselves were to be "FAS-ed", our response would be unprintable. We would struggle to find a place to sit in the Chamber for such a debate, the Division Lobby would be crowded and we would vote to ensure that what had been promised to us, and what we had paid into, would be delivered. This is the issue that we have to address for ourselves. If that kind of approach is good enough for us, it has to be good enough for the pensioners outside Parliament who have been lobbying us for goodness knows how many years. Throughout their entire working lives, they have been honest contributors to what they believed were honest schemes.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Simpson: I will not give way; this is almost my final sentence.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Lords for the amendments that they have passed, which get us all off the hook. Financially, it is a small hook, but morally and democratically, it is a huge hook. The best way in which we can thank the Lords is to vote to support their amendments when we have the chance to do so this evening.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): First, may I put on record what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson)? Listening to someone speaking from the heart as he did on behalf of his constituents for the five or six minutes that I heard him was a pleasure. We could all learn a lesson from the speech that he has just made.

The last time that I stood here and spoke on this subject, my constituent Peter Humphreys was in intensive care in Hemel Hempstead hospital. His wife was by his bedside, and I stood here waiting for a text message to find out how he was. Today, in Parliament square, Peter demonstrated with the rest of the pensioner action group, and I am sure that he will be watching me from somewhere at this moment. He is well, and he is getting better. All that he and his family care about is the

[Mike Penning]

campaign for justice for the pensioners who have had their life savings, their future and their children's future stolen from them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) referred to a lady called Marlene Cheshire, and I am sure that she too is watching me from somewhere. Her husband, David, did not make it. He died while he was waiting for money to come through from the scheme. As I have said in the House before, Marlene told David on his death-bed that she would get the money, and she has now just about got some money through.

We have heard about the scale of the problem this evening. We are talking about 125,000 people, along with their loved ones and families, who have been affected by this terrible occurrence. These are not rich people and they are not asking the state for more because they have not contributed. These are ordinary working people, who did the honourable and right thing that they were told to do—they paid into a safe scheme, and they were told by the Government of the day that the scheme was safe. The Government of the day was my Conservative Government and promises were made subsequently by later Governments.

It is sad to see how Government Members have got into a party political spat. Frankly, that was not necessary. We all know what is right and wrong and accusing hon. Members of jumping on to bandwagons or trying to gain political profit from this affair is, quite frankly, sick. As I say, we all know what is right and wrong here. I was approached by my Dexion group long before I became MP for my area. I read its file—a deep and long one—and its members tested me out, as I have said before, as to whether I had or had not read it. Their case, like many others, was cut and dry. They had gone into a scheme in good faith and paid into it.

On four occasions, the Government have been found guilty in respect of those pensioners. There is no argument about that. That is what the parliamentary ombudsman is for. Frankly, if the parliamentary ombudsman is not willing to stand up to Government—any Government—we should not have one. What is the point of having a parliamentary ombudsman if we cannot take cases to him as MPs when we believe that something has gone wrong? If any Government of any description can turn around and say, "We do not like that; we are going to be judge and jury on the matter", what would be the point of having a parliamentary ombudsman at all?

Here we are today, after the Government have been dragged through the courts, kicking and screaming about different schemes at different times. I suspect that it is all about trying to get a few more of their Back Benchers not to vote with the Opposition on the amendments. I hope and pray that many of their Back Benchers are tucked away somewhere where the Whips cannot get at them. I really hope so, because this great House must show that it cares about people's lives and futures. It must know the moral position—what is right and wrong. If we do not follow the moral course, the House will be denigrated this evening. We must do what is right for our constituents.

As we have already heard, we are talking about only a tiny amount of money in the big scheme of things. I have people telling me at my surgeries every week that they have been paid thousands of pounds too much through child tax credit or working tax credit—or Uncle Tom Cobleigh's credit, frankly. There is money flying about all over the show, particularly within this particular Department, which has a huge financial base. Money is being lost and costs cannot be agreed, but we are talking about people's lives and only a small amount of money.

I say to hon. Members that tomorrow morning they will have to look in the mirror and stare at someone who voted in a certain way tonight. Can we in all conscience not support these people so that they get the help that they need today? Let us argue about where the money comes from and broaden Young's remit to look into other sources such as banking assets. It is ludicrous to have such a narrow remit that focuses only on the insurance side of the problem. Let us put that to one side and give these people the help that they need today. If the amount of money that Young talks about is available, we may not need to use the guarantee of a loan from the Government—just as Maxwell pensioners did not have to. The money was there, should it have been needed. Let us stand up for people tonight in a moral and ethical way. I hope that all Members will believe that that is the right way to proceed and will support the Lords amendments. I congratulate their lordships on what they are doing.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): I had hoped that the Government would bring this sad series of events to an end this evening by making a real commitment to the pensioners. I am disappointed that, so far, that has not happened. I accept that progress has been made and I welcome what my right hon. Friend said today. We are creeping nearer to the 90 per cent. figure, but as many hon. Members have said this evening, what does it actually mean? We have heard about other benefits related to the Pension Protection Fund. I cannot understand why the Government will not go that extra step and make a proper commitment.

It was five years ago that Allied Steel and Wire went into receivership in Cardiff, so this saga has been going on for five long years, during which time I and other hon. Members have had people coming back and forth to our constituency surgeries, saying time and again that they expected a Labour Government to sort the problem out. I feel that the Government have made some efforts and achieved some progress, but they have not gone as far as they should.

Many people have campaigned long and hard on this issue and I know that many will be disappointed that the Government will not finally settle it today. We must pay tribute to the pensioners themselves and to the unions, particularly to Community and Amicus, which took the case to the European Court of Justice in the interest of its members in January 2006. The ruling said that the pension rules were inadequate in protecting the expected pensions of members of occupational pension schemes in the event of their employers becoming insolvent. If those rules had been implemented adequately, none of this would have happened. I still hope that we can settle the issue, but time is certainly running out. It is time that we did the right thing by all those affected—and some of the Lords amendments would achieve that, though I did not wish to reach the position where I felt I would have to support some of their amendments against the Government.

What guides me at this particular moment is the experience of my constituents in Cardiff, North, particularly ex-employees of Allied Steel and Wire. What they have told me has driven me to campaign for justice for those workers. I have seen for myself just what hardship the loss of their pensions has caused. We have all heard first hand just how hard it was for people to learn that they were going to lose first their jobs and then their pensions, despite having paid into an occupational pension scheme—often for decades and on the advice of the Government.

Many of those people worked in the hard environment of the steel industry for all their lives and many have told me about the devastating impact of these events. One man put it very bluntly when he said, "I face a bleak retirement", yet he had paid into a pension scheme for more than 20 years. Some people have never been able to talk about what happened to them. I have mentioned before that one man's wife told me that since this happened, he had been unable to say a word about it because the trauma was so great. Some members have died not knowing how much loved ones will have to live on. I do not feel that that can be allowed to go on and on. The excruciatingly long time that it is taking to get justice for all those affected by the collapse of pension schemes has caused untold stress and strain and affected the physical, emotional and mental health of many pensioners and their families.

I welcome what the Minister has proposed tonight, but it still continues the uncertainty. We still do not know what extra percentage will result from the proposals in the Young review. We still do not know how much the final figure will be when the Government match that percentage. My constituents tell me that the stress and uncertainty have gone on far too long and they urge us to bring this sad, appalling and morally wrong situation to a satisfactory conclusion.

The Young report offers some hope, but I fear that we still do not know what it will mean for those pensioners. If the Government offer no certainty today, I feel that I must consider voting in favour of any amendments that will result in payments at PPF levels for my constituents who are currently in receipt of FAS. I support the intention behind amendment No. 24, which is a simple amendment that aims to bring pensions up to PPF levels. I hope that we will have a separate vote on that amendment.

I am reflecting on the other amendments and support my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), the esteemed Chair of the Public Administration Committee, when he said that it would have been preferable not to have gone down the route of loans and lifeboats. It would have been better to have had a straight commitment from the Government and then to have found as much as possible from the sources identified in the Young report. That might have reduced enormously how much public money had to be used. However, as my hon. Friend said, sometimes it is necessary to make a commitment to public money, and I believe that this is one of those occasions.

7.30 pm

I very much regret that we, as a Government, have reached this stage today. This is a marvellous Bill, which promises pensioners a much better future and recognises the issue of women's involvement in pensions in a way in which it has not been recognised before. I would support it wholeheartedly were it not for the problems that we are discussing, and I am very disappointed that the Government have not reached a firmer conclusion. Unless the Minister says anything more definite, however, I shall vote for certainty and a better deal for my constituents.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan), who echoed what had been said by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field). We are no clearer about what the Government are proposing; it seems to be a bit more smoke and mirrors and a bit more jam tomorrow.

There was some laughter earlier, but I do not think any of us can really imagine what it is like to lose a pension after 30 years of saving. Many of those involved in this scheme were ordinary hard-working people, who did not expect riches in later life but certainly expected to avoid the poverty trap into which many on state pensions had fallen. They are not feckless spendthrifts waiting to be bailed out. As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, many went without during their working lives for the sake of the contingency fund that they thought they were setting up, not just for themselves but for their wives and families.

It was Government advice that those people were following. It is not as if they suddenly decided that some snake oil salesman had come up with a good idea; they were persuaded by the argument that this was the right thing to do. At £87.30, the state pension is hardly a king's ransom. It is no wonder that many of our hard-working constituents hoped to avoid the possibility of not being able to lead the life that they were expecting, with happiness and a degree of comfort in their old age.

My postbag, like that of others who are present, reflects the views of those who feel that they have been sadly deceived and face an impoverished old age. We must step in tonight, rather than delaying for the sake of the promise of some future benefit that is undefined. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) pressed the Minister for figures, he made some party political points that I think did a disservice to the House and to our current argument, but we were given no firm figures. We may not have a perfect system to propose, but at least we are offering a degree of security that was not forthcoming from the Government.

I believe that, as Members of Parliament, we are considered to be honourable, and that is a badge that we all like to wear. But my constituents who have been caught up in the Dexion pension crash may be watching the debate today, perhaps from somewhere closer than some of us may care to think, and they will draw their own conclusions if we do not seize the chance to right what Members on both sides of the House acknowledge to be a terrible wrong. This is not cheap party political posturing because some by-election is taking place somewhere; we are dealing with a long-standing complaint, recognised by Committees that were heavily Labour-dominated. I firmly reject the idea that what is being said tonight is intended merely to win a by-election.

[Anne Main]

As we have heard, the collapse of the Dexion pension scheme is not an isolated case, but it is a salutary tale which, like others, has prompted calls for action by Government. In 2006, a Select Committee said that the Government were focusing their energy on the findings of maladministration rather than considering the remedies. We have a remedy tonight.

The fact that the Government were not considering the remedies was seen to add to the distress of the people caught up in this mess—for it is a mess. A constituent of mine, Mr. Mike Chapman, is a former Dexion employee, and he and his family believe that the Government are dragging their heels. Although we have heard of similar cases tonight, Mike's case typifies the enormity of the personal crisis that faces people. In May 2003, 180 Dexion staff were caught up in that crisis.

There should not have been a problem. Those people thought that they were in a secure pension scheme. In fact, their contract insisted that they join a pension scheme. Mike was in the scheme, and having paid the additional voluntary contributions for more than 20 years, he rightly expected a relatively comfortable old age for himself and his family. But, as we have heard, the Dexion pension fund, like others, did not have enough money in the pot to meet the obligations. What is more, work forces and their pension funds are near the bottom of the pecking order when a failed company's creditors are ranked. A valuation of the Dexion pension fund showed a £20 million shortfall, which was disastrous for the employees.

At 64, my constituent Mike Chapman was within a fortnight of retirement. Can Members imagine that being snatched away from them within a fortnight of retirement? When Dexion—a firm that manufactured shelving—went into administration, it left a gaping hole in its pension scheme. Mike Chapman tells me that rather than gaining a pension of more than £1,200 a month, he and others like him will receive nothing. He is too young to qualify for the financial assistance scheme.

In the four years since Dexion's collapse, Mike and his wife Valerie have lived on their savings. They had saved, fortunately: like many others involved in pension schemes, they are a prudent couple. They have had to try to make ends meet by working in odd jobs. They have even worked as medical research guinea pigs to generate some income. Earlier today we talked of equality for women, but I can tell Members that for an older person, seeking employment to supplement one's income is not an easy option. It is not open to many people to seek gainful employment.

Being a sensible man, Mike had followed the Government's advice to the letter, and he has paid the price for doing so. As we have heard today, people were positively encouraged to act as he did. Mike paid in thousands of pounds of his own money because the Government and his employers told him to do so. He was promised that he would be safe and would receive a generous settlement, but that did not happen.

Shockingly, Mike and others discovered the hard way that final salary schemes were not worth the paper they were written on; they were only as good as the employers running them. I want to quote Mike's words, and those of others caught up in the scheme. I think that Labour Members who do not share our passionate feelings—*[Interruption.]* I refer to some Labour Members. Many have expressed the same wishes as us today, but unfortunately those on the Front Bench have not done the same. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that Labour Members want to hear Mike's words rather than shouting them down. He said:

"We had saved to pay for the good things in retirement, expecting the pension to take care of the day to day expenses. But life after 60 has been very different to how we imagined it.

After four years of fighting, I won't believe anything until I see the money in my pocket. We're planning on the basis of assuming the worst because we cannot afford to be disappointed."

The wife of a Dexion victim said:

"I would love to be able to ask Mr. Blair"

—this was before the arrival of our new Prime Minister—

"and those in Government what on earth they think we should do now"

—not next year, but now—

"but of course it is not possible to talk with such lofty folk, I can not even get him to read the letters I send."

Tonight the Government have a chance to listen to that lady, and to other people such as Mike. Mike is a former marketing manager. He lives in St Albans. He does not expect a quick U-turn, but Members can support him tonight.

Following articles in the media about the plight of Mike and other Dexion workers, they posted their comments on a website. Many drew attention to the moral dimension of the Government's apparent contempt for the public—that is how the Government are regarded: with contempt. They feel that they have been let down, and they speak eloquently of their experiences. I shall end by quoting comments that reflect the views of the many despairing victims from whom I am sure we have all heard at our constituency surgeries. This is what they tell us:

"Frankly the young might be better off spending their money having a good time while they are young rather than save for a Pension which might be taken away from them. At least they could have some happy memories while sitting huddled over a candle keeping warm".

"The government do not care about those of us that stand to lose all or part of our pensions because of government mismanagement and misinformation. And this from a so-called Labour Government. But never mind, the MPs can all rest easy that their pensions are safe."

"Many here"

—on the website, that is—

"have pointed out the moral dimension of the Government's contempt for the public, and failure to help people who are genuinely in need. The attitude of Blair and Brown, however, is rooted in mismanagement and incompetence."

Those are not my words, but the words of people who have nothing as a result of the Government's actions. They accuse all of us collectively—all hon. Members—of letting them down. Tonight we have a chance to show them that their comments may be misplaced, and that we can redress what has been done.

Some Members have seemed to wish to shout all that down, and not to wish to speak to the likes of Mike Chapman. I am the voice of those people tonight. I hope that other Members will join us in the Lobbies,

and ensure that we provide at least a degree of financial security for an old age to which people thought they were entitled and to which I believe they have a right.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The debate has been long and passionate, and I shall reply briefly to it. There is clearly great sympathy in the House for the pensioners affected by companies having closed their pension schemes. No one wants to lose their pension, regardless of whether it is a private or a public sector pension. Concern has been expressed today by Members in all parts of the Chamber about those pensioners, and concern has been expressed in the other place that more money should be spent. There is disagreement about where that money will come from, but the Young interim report is positive about our being able to find more money for the pensioners. Today I have been pleased to announce that it is our intention to match any additional funds the review might bring forward with the goal of moving to the 90 per cent. mark. We also hope that the Young review will help to enable us to respond properly to the issue of solvent employers.

It is in pensioners' interests that we get them more money as quickly as possible, so let us rapidly secure the Bill's Royal Assent so that we can deliver immediate payments. We will not do justice to the pensioners by agreeing to the complex, costly and contradictory provisions before us. They will not deliver for the pensioners, which is the key objective. That is why I call on Members to support the motion to disagree.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 16 disagreed to.

AFTER CLAUSE 18

Lords amendment: No. 16.

Amendment (a) proposed in lieu thereof:

Financial Assistance Scheme: eligibility where employers remain solvent

To move the following Clause:—

The Pensions Act 2004 (c. 35) is amended as follows.

In section 286 (financial assistance for members etc.) insert after subsection (2)—

"(2A) Conditions prescribed under paragraph (c) in the definition of "qualifying pension scheme" in subsection (2) shall not exclude schemes which have been wound up in the absence of an insolvency event as referred to in Part 2, provided that such wind-up began before 11th June 2003.".'.—*[Dr. Tony Wright.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 250, Noes 305.

Division No. 187] [7.42 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burden, Richard
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clegg, Mr. Nick
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Cummings, John
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Field, Mr. Mark
Fisher, Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Heyes, David
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Jones, Lynne
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick

Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moore, Mr. Michael
Morgan, Julie
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Short, rh Clare
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Scames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Dr. Tony
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stewart Jackson and Jeremy Wright

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr. Gordon
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew

Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Frank Roy and Tony Cunningham

Question accordingly negatived.

Lords amendment: No. 17.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Liz Blackman.]*

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 253.

Division No. 188] **[8.01 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr. Gordon
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim

Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Frank Roy and Tony Cunningham

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burden, Richard
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clegg, Mr. Nick
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Drew, Mr. David
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Field, Mr. Mark
Fisher, Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Heyes, David
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas

Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Jones, Lynne
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moore, Mr. Michael
Morgan, Julie
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Osborne, Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Short, rh Clare
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Dr. Tony
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Jeremy Wright and
Mr. Stewart Jackson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Lords amendments 18 to 24 disagreed to.

Clause 1

STATE PENSION

Lords amendment: No. 1.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Could you clarify whether the intention was to debate amendment No. 1, which I believed the Minister was seeking to do?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Minister has just moved the amendment formally and does not intend to speak at this time.

The Question is, That this House disagrees with the Lords in their amendment No. 1. As many as are of that opinion say Aye—*[Interruption.]* If Members want to contribute, they must stand to indicate their wish to do so.

Mr. Waterson: Further to the point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My understanding was that the Minister would say something about the Government's motion on amendment No. 1, but if he does not intend to, I am happy to do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but we have moved on. The Minister moved the motion formally, indicating that he did not want to contribute—

Mr. Mike O'Brien *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) now wishes to contribute to the debate, he may do so.

Mr. Waterson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall be brief because I know that other Members want to participate.

Many issues relate to amendment No. 1, which is the method proposed by Baroness Hollis in the other place, to allow—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Will Members who are not intending either to listen to the debate or take part in it please leave the Chamber quietly?

Mr. Waterson: The amendment was proposed by Baroness Hollis in the other place and carried by quite a handsome majority with support from, I think, Members of all the different parties, including some of my Conservative colleagues. It is designed to help women with broken contribution records to be able to buy back

[Mr. Waterson]

previous years retrospectively—so there is an element of a contribution being made by the women—and to increase the limit to nine years, whether consecutive or not. As I understand it, the rules currently refer to six years and they have to be six consecutive years. There may well be women who get to the end of their working lives and find that they have any number of years still unpaid for. The amendment has the backing of Age Concern, Help the Aged and, above all, the Equal Opportunities Commission.

I have two issues to raise. I do not know whether the Minister will have a chance to reply. The Minister in the Lords said that the cost would be £260 million. Is that netted off against the means-tested benefits, such as pension credit, which the women might otherwise claim if they did not have this advantage? Would this really be an extra spending commitment if the Government, or any Opposition party, were to sign up to it? As I understand it, the proposal is not to change the rules on eligibility, but merely to increase take-up. All Governments, at different times, try to increase take-up by app' ing different methods to benefits and so on, but does that actually involve a commitment to greater Government spending?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend Baroness Hollis proposed the amendment in the other place. We understand, and are very sympathetic to, the objectives of the amendment, and hope that we can deliver its aim of helping women in this country if at all possible. The Government have always been clear about their desire to provide fairer outcomes for women and the measures in the Bill demonstrate that commitment. We recognise the strength of feeling expressed in the other place and we are keen to find a solution that may bring more people into the contributory system for the first time. However, this is a complicated issue, and it is important to explore the complexities and possible implications of the range of options, including the proposal in my right hon. Friend's amendment.

There are for example options in relation to the number of years that could be purchased, the rate at which additional contributions could be paid, the treatment of individuals overseas, and the interaction with the current system. These have varying administrative, legal, cost, distributional and policy implications, and we need to ensure that we get any targeted solution right. We want to find a way to overcome these problems. We are keen that any solution should deliver a fair outcome for individuals who have experienced complex and fragmented lives, but at the same time we need to be mindful of how any changes would impact on people living overseas.

With that in mind, the Government will commit themselves to looking at the range of options in the coming weeks, including the option to buy additional years as proposed in the amendment, and to provide an update in the pre-Budget report. In doing so, the Government will consider all the options in terms of the following principles: fairness—any solution must help those most in need; affordability—any solution must be affordable and sustainable; simplicity—any solution must be deliverable, simple to implement and understandable to those it would benefit. There is no difference between my right hon. Friend's wish to help women in this country and our wish, but we need to deal with the practical problems. I cannot make a commitment that we will achieve that outcome today, but we will use our best endeavours to deliver the principles of her amendment. She has authorised me to tell the House that, on the basis of that statement, she is now content and believes that this is a useful basis on which to go forward. I therefore ask the House to reject the amendment from the other place.

Danny Alexander: I will speak very briefly, in the remaining minute of time. The Liberal Democrats believe that this very important amendment will tackle the great injustice faced by many women pensioners. In particular, it will provide more flexibility to those people, especially women, who currently lack the appropriate level of contributions to get a full pension, even under the new system. It will help those whose employment records are broken, for example. It will also help with the cliff edge that people will face when the new system is introduced from 2010. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) pointed out, currently that cliff edge could confront people whose pension date is just before the new system is brought in and could cost them about £28,500. That is why it is important that the House support the Lords amendment.

Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 312, Noes 68.

Division No. 189] **[8.25 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy

Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Frank Roy and Tony Cunningham

NOES

Alexander, Danny
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Brake, Tom
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Lorely
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Clegg, Mr. Nick
Davies, Mr. Dai
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Featherstone, Lynne
Foster, Mr. Don
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Goldsworthy, Julia
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hemming, John
Holmes, Paul
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, David
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kramer, Susan

Lamb, Norman
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
McCrea, Dr. William
Mulholland, Greg
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robertson, Angus
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Spink, Bob
Swinson, Jo
Taylor, David
Taylor, Matthew
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Willis, Mr. Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Jenny Willott and
Paul Rowen

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

It being more than three hours after the commencement of proceedings, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that hour, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Lords amendments Nos. 12 to 14 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 28 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 73 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 2, 3 to 11, 25 to 75, and 29 to 72 agreed to.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to certain of their amendments to the Bill: Danny Alexander, Mr. Wayne David, Natascha Engel, Mr. James Plaskitt and Mr. Nigel Waterson; Mr. James Plaskitt to be the Chairman of the Committee; Three to be the quorum of the Committee. —*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In view of the imminent deportation scheduled for 9.30 tomorrow evening of Samar Rashavi, a Christian lady against whom a death warrant has been issued by the Iranian Government, have you received a request from any Minister to come to the House to make a statement about any change of policy from the usual line, which is that we do not deport when somebody is in serious danger of the death penalty, particularly for a reason that we would not recognise in this country?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving me notice that she would raise a point of order. I have no knowledge of any intention of any statement being made to the House, but the right hon. Lady has used the device of a point of order to raise the matter, and I am sure that what she said will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. I cannot add substantively to that.

Parliament (Joint Departments) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme) (No. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 83A(9)(Programme motions),

That the Order of 19th June 2007 (Parliament (Joint Departments) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraph 2 shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—*[Helen Goodman.]*

Question agreed to.

Parliament (Joint Departments) Bill [*Lords*]

Considered in Committee.

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

JOINT DEPARTMENTS OF THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

8.42 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Helen Goodman): As my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), said when he introduced the Second Reading debate on the Bill, the Parliament (Joint Departments) Bill is unusual in that it is neither a Government nor a Back-Bench Bill, but a parliamentary Bill, concerned with the machinery of Parliament. The Bill has its origins in the decision of the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords House Committee to set up a joint Department to manage information and communications technology on behalf of both Houses.

We have a tradition in the House of making decisions about the services that we all need in a non-partisan spirit. I am pleased to say that the Bill enjoyed all-party support in the House of Lords, and that was apparent again when the Second Reading debate was taken Upstairs in Second Reading Committee. I am grateful in particular to the hon. Members for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara) and for North Devon (Nick Harvey) for their support. I am pleased also to see my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran) in his place. I know that as Chairman of the Administration Committee, he has taken a particular interest in parliamentary ICT and in the Bill.

Clause 1 establishes the key principle that there can be joint Departments of both Houses of Parliament. Although the two Houses have long since shared the building, they have always maintained separate administrations and staff. To some extent that must always be so, because there are occasions when the two Houses take contrary positions on the issues before them and require separate procedural support and advice. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly clear that it makes sense for the two Houses to share the management of much of our infrastructure. Until now,

that has been achieved more or less satisfactorily by one House employing the staff to deliver a particular service and the other agreeing to make an appropriate financial contribution in exchange for a share in the service. For example, the House of Commons has managed the staff who maintain the buildings for both Houses while the House of Lords has managed the staff of the joint parliamentary archives.

8.45 pm

Over the past 20 years, Members of both Houses and the two administrations have become increasingly dependent on ICT services. In response, during the 1990s the two Houses created a combination of joint and separate functions to meet the new requirements. In addition, most of the specialised Departments and offices of the two Houses acquired their own computer applications and staff, all under separate management arrangements. The consequence was that at the beginning of the present decade we had acquired myriad overlapping IT systems and teams. That is why, in 2004, the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords House Committee accepted the recommendation from the Clerks of both Houses that there should be a single strategically managed ICT service functioning, for the first time, as a joint Department. It was agreed then that the new service called the parliamentary information and communication technology service—PICT—should be set up on an interim basis.

As parliamentarians, we all know that our dependency on ICT can only increase—a point tellingly made in the excellent report by the Administration Committee, "Information and communication technology services for members". High-quality ICT services are essential for all Members to fulfil their responsibilities to their constituents and in Parliament. That requires careful strategic management on our behalf, and it eminently makes sense for them to be managed on a joint House basis. PICT is already operating in a shadow form, but for the longer term it needs a stable framework for joint employment, which is what the Bill is designed to achieve. Clause 1 therefore establishes the principle of joint Departments, and the remaining clauses flesh out the details.

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome the Deputy Leader of the House and congratulate her on her appointment. I did so previously in a Committee Room, but this is her first time at the Dispatch Box. I hope that she and I will be able to work together constructively, as I was able to with her predecessor, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), in the best interests of all in this House.

As the hon. Lady said, this is not Government legislation but business of the House. As such, it is good to see that it is not contentious and has the agreement of all shades of the political spectrum. Among those who agree with the Bill, I am pleased to see the Chairman of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran), and we also have agreement from the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey), representing the House of Commons Commission.

It is not my intention to detain the House for too long, but I should like to make a few comments. As we have heard, the Bill sets up a joint Department for parliamentary information and communication technology. It is extraordinary that in the 21st century the Palace of Westminster still operates as two separate units, whereby we have separate entities for retaining staff, signing contracts, holding property and the like. Although there has been very close co-operation, it is good that we are at last getting modern in the Palace and recognising the need for joint Departments.

In the case of information technology, there used to be some nine separate units serving all the various people and Departments in both Houses. In January 2006, it was decided to set up a joint Department, and it is fair to say that on the whole the work of that Department has been very good, subject to the odd error at times, but with constant work on improvement. The vital service provided to all of us was rightly highlighted in an Administration Committee report in May of this year. The report spoke of our enormous reliance on information technology and the work that the staff of PICT do on our behalf in this House, and in our constituencies by way of remote services.

The Bill seeks to formalise the initial Department that was set up by creating one with the power jointly to employ staff, on behalf of both Houses, and to safeguard their rights, as well as to protect the rights of future employees, particularly regarding employment legislation, while ensuring the applicability of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006. The Bill also provides for the corporate officers of the Department to be able to sign contracts and to hold property and the like on behalf of both Houses. Let me emphasise that those corporate officers can operate only with the explicit approval of the House of Commons Commission and the other place.

Finally, the Bill provides for the future creation of other joint Departments, but let me emphasise that such Departments will be created only if there is agreement from both Houses. Given the obvious economies of scale, the pooling of expertise and the likelihood of better services all round, it is good to see that this Bill provides for such a future eventuality. Possible future candidates for joint Departments may well be the proposed parliamentary visitor centre, the Refreshment Departments, the Libraries and the *Official Report*. Although I understand that there are no plans at present for any further joint Departments, it is worth noting the contents of the Tebbit report on House of Commons management and services, which was published on 18 June. It encourages the House to consider further joint Departments with the other place, but it nevertheless cautions that we should see how this first joint Department operates. With those comments, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall conclude for the moment.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I just point out to the hon. Gentleman, and for the benefit of everyone else, that now we are in Committee, I am Mr. Chairman or Sir Alan rather than Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is just a small point.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Thank you, Sir Alan. I, too, welcome the Parliamentary Secretary to her new post

[Sir Robert Smith]

and her first Committee on the Floor of the House. I wish her well because she has an important role to play in ensuring the smooth operation of the House for all hon. Members.

Clause 1 establishes a simpler way of getting joint operations between the two Houses and, as has been said, anyone looking in from outside might be a bit surprised about the situation. However, we have to remember the history of the two Houses and the fact that they are separate constitutional entities. Therefore, over time, they have evolved separate ways of functioning. Now, it makes a lot of sense to bring them together if we can, if we do so for the sake of efficiency and effectiveness.

PICT may have had glitches, problems and so on, but we welcome the extra support that has come from trying to build a larger organisation to support our IT. If I think back over the 10 years since I have been here, I can say that the changes in what hon. Members have been able to do through IT support in remote areas in order to access this building and documents have made quite a difference. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran) recognised that having 650 small businesses to serve is quite a challenge for PICT and it is important to use the new structure to take that forward.

It would be interesting to hear from the Parliamentary Secretary what other joint Departments are in the pipeline. How far advanced are the ideas of setting up other joint Departments to bring other efficiencies to support Members of both Houses? Are there any at the moment, or are we dealing with this Bill purely to ensure that PICT is established, meaning that it will be some time down the line before we see further evolution building on the back of clause 1?

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, North) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to her new position. It is a much deserved promotion and I look forward to working with her on the Bill and on many other issues in future.

I welcome the Bill, which is long overdue. In my current post as Chairman of the Administration Committee, I have learned that each House jealously regards its distinctive character. It is important to examine ways, as we are doing with PICT, to rationalise—that is sometimes a dangerous word—and improve services. Anyone who reads the Administration Committee's report on PICT will realise that, even in the short space of time that the organisation has been operating in a unified manner, the service for Members of both Houses has dramatically increased. As the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith) said, glitches and problems remain, but we are working hard on them with PICT and improvements will continue. I hope that our report provides a way ahead for that.

On other matters, there is clearly scope for integration. The hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara) mentioned some of those that are under consideration. We have co-operated with the other place on several issues, most notably on providing an education unit. We have especially poor services for children who visit this place. By co-operating and co-ordinating, we hope to have an improved education unit in the not-too-distant future.

I hope that the experience of PICT and developing the education centre will lead to other developments. It makes sense in this modern world that economies of scale will apply to both Houses. Improvements in services should accompany them and I look forward to that.

Helen Goodman: I am most grateful to all hon. Members who have made such kind remarks and for the constructive support that they offer to the Bill.

The hon. Member for Kingston—

Sir Robert Smith: West Aberdeenshire.

Helen Goodman: I am sorry. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that the Bill sets out a general proposition for joint Departments because it took slightly longer to bring forward the measure than would have been the case from a management point of view because of the shortage of parliamentary time. There are no plans for new joint Departments, but if decisions are made later, we will not need to wait for full establishment. I hope that that is satisfactory.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

EXERCISE OF FUNCTIONS OF THE CORPORATE OFFICERS

Question proposed. That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Helen Goodman: The Bill establishes the principle that there may be joint Departments. For the time being, as we have already said, there are plans for only one—PICT. During our earlier proceedings, Members of both Houses expressed a range of views on the desirability of extending the joint Department model to other services used by both Houses, such as catering, the Libraries and *Hansard*.

The recent review of management and services of the House of Commons by Sir Kevin Tebbit also encourages us to explore further joint working with the House of Lords in the interests of greater efficiency.

I agree with those who have said that we need to adopt a gradualist approach. Organisational change always needs to be tackled sensitively and with proper planning and consultation. As the Administration Committee said in its recent report:

"Such an exercise requires a clear and coherent approach if it is to be successful. Even with such an approach, it will take time for the new organisation to work optimally".

So the Bill provides for the option of future joint Departments, but it also creates some safeguards. Clause 2 requires that any proposal from the two corporate officers to create or add new functions to a joint Department would have to be agreed by both the House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords House Committee. In the House of Lords, in accordance with the traditions of that House, it would also go to the Floor of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

STAFF

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Helen Goodman: Clause 3 provides some key safeguards for staff who may be moved into a joint Department of Parliament in the future. It provides that pay will be kept broadly in line with pay in the Home civil service, which is already the case for staff of the House of Commons under the House of Commons (Administration) Act of 1978. It provides the same broad alignment for other conditions of service, with the important proviso that arrangements must be consistent with the requirements of the two Houses; and thirdly, it creates an absolute requirement that staff pensions should be kept in line with the principal civil service pension scheme, again a statutory requirement that already exists for staff of the House of Commons.

Mr. Doran: The Minister is aware that the trade unions have an issue with the changes that might occur to their current position. Under the 1978 Act, they have the right to go directly to the Commission and they are concerned that that right will not be preserved. Undertakings have been given that the right will remain, but it will not be a statutory one.

Helen Goodman: The reason we have not been able to incorporate into the Bill the provisions of the 1978 Act that provide formal access for the trade unions to the House of Commons Commission is that, in this instance, the joint Department is the employer. The trade unions have always made their feelings known to the Commission and they will continue to be effective in doing that. The heads of the joint Department will keep the Commission and the House of Lords in touch with what they are doing.

Access to the Commission, as under the 1978 Act, has been invoked on only two occasions, on both of which the issue was remitted immediately to ACAS for arbitration. That is what is proposed in the draft disputes procedure for the joint Department. In practice, there will be no serious lessening of the real and effective rights of the unions. There is also an effective Whitley structure in the House of Commons and a new Whitley structure for the joint Department is in the process of being established. I hope that satisfies my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran).

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

STAFF TRANSFERS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Helen Goodman *rose—*

The Chairman: Order. Before the Minister speaks to the clause, I should mention that if she is going to introduce every clause as helpfully as she is doing, the need for an extensive debate on Third Reading debate may be obviated.

Helen Goodman: Thank you, Sir Alan.

Clause 4 applies the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 in full to the transfer of staff into a parliamentary joint Department. There has already been a full process of consultation with the trade unions representing our staff at every stage of the exercise. As I have said, both Houses have established Whitley processes, and preparations for a new Whitley structure are being established.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5

APPLICATION OF ENACTMENTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Helen Goodman: Clause 5 ensures that the employment law that already applies to the staff of the two Houses separately would apply to the staff of a joint Department. It also provides that other enactments that apply to either House would apply in the same way to something done by or in relation to a joint Department as it would if it were done by or in relation to each House. For example, the Data Protection Act 1998 would apply to data held by a joint Department on behalf of either House in the same way as it would if they were held in each House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Order for Third Reading read.

9.7 pm

Helen Goodman: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is very rare for us to legislate for the administration of Parliament, the last time being in the Parliamentary Corporate Bodies Act 1992. The purpose of the Bill is to facilitate the provision of joint services to both Houses, through a unified management structure under the direction of an official who is accountable to both Houses. The Bill is a sensible evolutionary measure that recognises the reality that the two Houses co-operate in many practical areas of day-to-day administration, even when they sometimes disagree on larger matters. The Bill enables us to co-operate in a new way by employing staff in joint Departments. In doing so it gives full employment protection to our staff in the way that I am sure the whole House would wish and expect. The Bill provides for a management structure that should deliver services more efficiently and provide scope for procurement savings and value for money for the taxpayer. However, the most important thing is that PICT should be customer focused—in other words, that it provide the services that Members want and need in a timely and effective manner.

Between the Bill being published and considered in another place and coming to this House for its Second

[Helen Goodman]

Reading, the Select Committee on Administration produced its excellent report "Information and Communication Technology Services for Members". I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran) and all the members of the Committee for their hard work in producing the report. It referred—I know that this will strike a chord with many hon. Members—to what it described as an undertone of dissatisfaction with the services currently provided. There are issues about remote access to the parliamentary network, technical support for constituency offices and the maintenance of equipment.

The evidence to the Committee from Members of Parliament provides salutary reading. It demonstrates that politeness is not a substitute for effectiveness, nor courtesy for competence. The right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) said:

"PICT does not provide quick and competent support".

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Ms Butler) said that PICT staff seem "very inexperienced". My right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), commenting on his experience as a Minister, said that

"the various software incompatibilities meant that I could not access my diary or update my address books in ways that ran across both of my systems. The consequence of this is constant juggling".

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) wrote about her concerns about the contracts with suppliers, and the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) mentioned the problems for those of us whose constituency location means that we require remote access in rural areas. The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) wanted more discussion between PICT and users, and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) believed that there were

"fundamental internal communication problems".

I know that there have been tangible improvements over the past year. PICT has recently opened two PICT local offices—on the first floor of Norman Shaw South and in 2 Millbank—where Members can drop in with problems or requests and also see a model office set-up. I understand that PICT is also refocusing its management structure to deal with the agenda now set by the Administration Committee report, so that there is one director for Members services. I wish to assure hon. Members, however, that the Leader of the House and I understand the very real frustrations that many Members feel. I have met the director of PICT and discussed these serious issues with her.

The establishment of the new Department is also an opportunity for a major step forward in the quality of services. PICT is now considering the recommendations of the Administration Committee report as a possible work plan for the next three years and hoping to address ways of improving performance, constituency support and access, and mobile log-ins. Some of the issues involved—for example, extending the support available to us in our constituencies—might require additional funding, and that will be a matter for the House of Commons Commission to consider when it responds to the Administration Committee report. A menu of costed options will be given to the Commission before the end of the year.

One of the key issues in the Administration Committee report is the need for a regular channel of communication between Members and PICT concerning Members' needs and service requirements. The Committee has suggested that there should be a Members' ICT customer forum, chaired by a Member of this House, but also involving representatives of our staff working here and in constituency offices. The House of Commons Commission will respond formally to the report in due course and will take a view, but I am sure that all hon. Members will agree with the principle that PICT must focus on what its customers are saying and on the problems that we have. In order for that to happen, we need to improve the channels of communication.

However, the immediate effect of the Bill will be to enable the first joint Department, PICT, to operate on a stable and sustainable basis and, as I said earlier, to move the management of our critical ICT services to the higher level that a 21st century Parliament expects. Once again, I am grateful to all hon. Members present for their support.

9.12 pm

Mr. Vara: This is an important Bill that sets out to improve the services to both Houses of Parliament. It is fair to recognise that it is part of Parliament's evolutionary process to help it to come forward into the 21st century. We all hope that it will lead to better services, greater efficiency and better use of the taxpayer's money in running the Palace of Westminster.

I understand that all the affected staff and relevant trade unions have been extensively consulted regarding the joint Department. There is, nevertheless, understandable anxiety on the part of the unions about any future joint Departments. That point was picked up by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Doran). It is important to emphasise for the record that, if there are to be further joint Departments, it is vital to have full and proper consultation with all the staff concerned and all the relevant trade unions.

May I take this opportunity to thank all the staff of the joint Department. I accept that there are still problems, especially regarding remote services to our constituencies, but efforts are being made to improve the services all the time. An example is the addition of two new offices, one in Norman Shaw South and the other in 2 Millbank. This has been a period of enormous change and uncertainty for the staff concerned, and I hope that, now that the Bill is progressing, matters will settle down for them. In such circumstances, staff are not thanked often enough, and when they are thanked, they are not thanked generously. I think that I speak on behalf of us all when I say that they do a wonderful job. Without them, we would all be very much at a loss, so it is good to have our appreciation put on the record.

May I also thank all those who have taken part in all the debates and those who worked in Committees such as the one chaired by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North? Although this particular Bill has not seen too many contributors, it is nevertheless fair to say that those contributions have been just as important as when many more have contributed.

May I conclude by thanking all the House Officers for their involvement throughout the process? My personal thanks go in particular to Richard Ware, the director of resources at PICT. His personal help and assistance has been much appreciated.

This is a unique Bill, which heralds the changing way in which the Palace of Westminster will be run in future. Let us all hope that it will be very much for the better.

9.16 pm

Sir Robert Smith: I also support Third Reading and I echo the concerns about the anxiety felt by staff at any time of change. Even when there is no intention to cause disruption, there are always moments of anxiety and uncertainty for the staff involved, so the management of that change has to be handled sensitively and effectively through proper dialogue and negotiations.

It is also important to recognise that the benefits from reorganisation will depend on how it is delivered and managed. The Bill is fairly dry and simple legally and technically, but its delivery and outcome will make a difference. As the Deputy Leader of the House highlighted in her Third Reading speech, many practical and active things on the ground need to be sorted and dealt with. That will not come from a piece of legislation alone; the Bill will not change things overnight. It does, however, create a structure through which those things can be managed more formally and handled more effectively. It should therefore provide more stability on which to build for the future. I welcome the Bill and wish those who now have to deliver its promises all the best in bringing it forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed without amendment.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I propose to take motions 5 and 6 together.

Motions made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

Companies

That the draft Companies (Political Expenditure Exemption) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 24th May, be approved.

Social Security

That the draft Housing Benefit (Loss of Benefit) (Pilot Scheme) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 20th June, be approved.—*[Mark Tami.]*

Question agreed to.

Aldrin Quibuyen

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mark Tami.]*

9.17 pm

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the case of my constituent, Mr. Aldrin Quibuyen, and his family, who are currently subject to a detention and removal order. I am asking the Minister to consider revoking it tonight by using the powers of discretion at his disposal.

Perhaps I should begin by briefly setting out the facts of the case. Mr. Quibuyen, who is a qualified nurse, entered the UK entirely properly and in accordance with immigration rules in 2003 with a work permit for his employer Craegmoor Healthcare, and was granted leave to remain until 2008. In May 2005, a new work permit application was approved for a change of employment to Caeffair nursing home, but the granting of a new work permit also necessitates a new application for further leave to remain to be lodged within six months. Mr. Quibuyen should have been informed of that by his new employer, but due to a combination of administrative error and some confusion on his part, a new application was not launched for a full 15 months. As a result, Mr. Quibuyen was informed by letter on 29 November 2006 that his application for further leave to remain had been refused. The reason given was that he had breached his condition of stay by continuing to work for an employer without the required permission. His leave to enter was then curtailed as a result and, as that has now passed, he and his family are being asked to leave the UK as soon as practicable.

I would like to say at the outset that it is undeniable that Mr. Quibuyen, in failing to submit the proper form within the allotted time, was in breach of the regulations; and the officials acted perfectly reasonably and within the terms of the rules. I have to say, however, that if I had to leave the country every time I forgot to fill in a vital piece of paperwork, I would have been deported many times over the years. It is an easy mistake to make. I think that there is plenty of evidence to prove that in this case that is precisely what it was—an honest mistake. Mr. Quibuyen remained in contact with the authorities throughout his time here, and thought that he was complying with the regulations. When he realised his mistake, he admitted it and sought to rectify it.

That brings us to the question before us tonight: is the evidence of Mr. Quibuyen's good character and honest intent sufficient basis to warrant the use of ministerial discretion for which the regulations allow? I think that there are good reasons for applying that discretion in this case. First, Mr. Quibuyen is diligent, extremely hard working and much appreciated by his employer, and by the hundreds of people for whom he has cared during the four years he has worked here. If he were a citizen, we would call him an exemplary citizen. For the first two years he managed to sustain himself, sent money home to his family in the Philippines, and saved enough for a deposit on a house so that his family could join him, as they did in December 2004.

[Adam Price]

Individuals like Mr. Quibuyen, who work hard, pay their taxes and are never a drain on state resources, are concrete examples of the success of the Government's immigration policy, with its emphasis on managed migration to plug vital skill gaps in particular sectors and local labour markets. We all know that the national health service, and the care sector more widely, could not function as well as they do without the valued contribution of overseas workers in general, and in particular the high quality care provided by nurses from the Philippines.

The second reason for reconsidering the removal order is the extent to which the family have integrated with the local community in Ammanford. Mr. Quibuyen's daughter, Phebe, was born here, and his son Buzz—Aldrin—is doing very well at school. He has learned Welsh and English, and recently won a spelling award in both languages. The family are part of our community and the people of Ammanford have taken them to their hearts.

Since December last year, Aldrin and his wife Rhoda have been unable to work or provide for themselves or their family. It is testimony to the high regard in which Aldrin—affectionately known locally as Al—and his family are held that throughout this incredibly difficult time they have been entirely sustained by the financial support of their local church, the Salvation Army and the generosity of ordinary people in Ammanford. I also pay tribute to Carmarthenshire county council, which has been very understanding in dealing with Mr. Quibuyen's council tax arrears. I am grateful to the council for that.

As I am sure the Minister agrees, that tradition of hospitality and solidarity is the true picture of race relations in this country, and it is something that we should celebrate. The Minister will have seen a petition bearing thousands of names and received hundreds of letters from members of the public asking him and his colleagues to reconsider.

In the times in which we live, of course it is right and proper for the Government to insist on a tightly policed system of rules governing who can and cannot enter and work in this country, but it is also right for there to be enough flexibility for Ministers to use discretion in cases where there is no deliberate attempt to deceive and a punitive approach would clearly not be in the public interest. In instances like this, in which an honest mistake has been made, such an approach might well send the wrong signal to honest individuals who may merely have delayed submitting the forms. They should be told that if they contact the authorities, it will not necessarily be a case of automatic deportation: there should be flexibility, and each case should rightly be judged on its merits. Sending Mr. Quibuyen and his family back to the Philippines would devastate him financially and emotionally. He would lose everything that he had worked for and his family, already uprooted once, would be uprooted again—all because he had overlooked a form of which, regrettably, he was not sufficiently aware.

There are good compassionate reasons to reconsider, but also more hard-headed reasons. It is people like Mr. Quibuyen—people of good character who are prepared to work hard and abide by the rules, and whose skills we desperately need—whom we should keep in this country. Like thousands of others who have come from the Philippines and elsewhere, Mr. Quibuyen came here to answer our call for people to plug the skills gap in the health and care sectors. I think that we should honour those people's commitment by treating them fairly and reasonably.

The Minister is fair minded and he will have had an opportunity to review the full facts of the case. I hope that he will see the merit of some of the arguments I have presented. I appreciate that rules should be observed and enforced, but on this occasion I think that there is cause to think again about what is the appropriate course of action.

9.25 pm

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. Liam Byrne): I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price) for having initiated the debate. I agreed with much of his analysis of the requirements of our immigration system, and he is right that people such as Mr. Quibuyen have, over the past decade, made an important contribution to the health and social care sectors. About a quarter of the work permits issued to foreign nationals in that period have been for employment in those sectors. Many successful applicants are well qualified and provide compassionate and effective care, and the work they do is important not only to national systems but to local communities.

In the case in question, I think that honest mistakes were made in submitting the application. There is a degree of complexity in how to apply for such work permits, and this case underlines the need for us to simplify the system, which is why we propose to introduce a points-based system next year and to overhaul radically the way in which employers sponsor employees.

The hon. Gentleman has set out the basic facts of the case. In essence, Mr. Quibuyen applied for and entered the country under a work permit with one employer, with 16 months leave, then he changed jobs a couple of years later and reapplied, not realising that he also needed to refresh his leave in line with his new authority to work in the country. Therefore, a little later on he was out of time and the form he filled in was the wrong one, so when it was resubmitted it was rejected as an out-of-time application. Subsequently, Border and Immigration Agency officials—acting properly and in line with the immigration rules—refused the application and curtailed the leave in a way that they thought might be helpful, but which had the effect of striking out appeal rights. All of that led to protracted correspondence, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for persisting with this matter.

I have recently asked for the case to be reviewed. It is clear to me that an honest mistake was made, given the background of the family and the integrity they have shown both in work and in how they have interacted with the Border and Immigration Agency to comply with the reporting restrictions that they were asked to honour. Therefore, this is a suitable case for discretion to be exercised. I propose to grant Mr. Quibuyen and

his family a period of leave, to allow him and his employer to remedy the situation.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing the case to the attention of the House. It is important that Members have the opportunity to test on the Floor of the House how policy that we debate in Whitehall and Parliament is translated into practice. Sometimes that translation is not perfect; this was a case in point.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 18 July 2007

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Queen's Speech

1. **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to engage in dialogue with Parliament and the public in seeking their views on the contents of the Queen's Speech. [150195]

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): In setting out details of the content of the provisional list of Bills for the next parliamentary Session, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in his statement last Wednesday that he intended the Government's initial thinking, formerly private, to be the subject of widespread discussion and debate. Further and full information about the Bills is now available on the Cabinet Office website and in hard copy, from the Vote Office among other sources. We want to hear the views of all parliamentarians, members of the public and interest groups on what we have proposed and what they think should be changed.

Barbara Keeley: May I say how pleased I am to ask the first question of the new team at the Ministry of Justice, and to welcome my right hon. Friend and his team to their new responsibilities? May I also say how much I welcome the news that there will be additional debate and dialogue about the Queen's Speech? Can my right hon. Friend tell us whether that additional debate and dialogue might lead to further proposals or expanded legislation to be included in the draft programme?

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for her congratulations to me and to the other members of my team.

The whole purpose of consulting people is to take account of others' views. It is always a fact that the legislative programme changes—I know that, having been responsible for it as Leader of the House—but in the past the changes have principally been made in private. Now we want to hear from parliamentarians and members of the public and take account of what is said so that, with luck, the programme will be more in line with the overall opinion of parliamentarians and the public before we publish the final list—or Her Majesty does—in the Queen's Speech in November.

Mr. Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on his appointment. May I remind him that the public are well aware that many Acts of Parliament do not fulfil their intended purpose? Will he therefore continue to work with the authorities in both Houses to produce an effective system of post-legislative scrutiny, on which we were working beforehand and which really needs to be brought into play?

Mr. Straw: I thank the right hon. Gentleman—the Chairman of what will shortly become the Select Committee on Justice—for his congratulations, and look forward to working with his Committee in a constructive manner. I agree with him about post-legislative scrutiny. The Law Commission presented some very sensible proposals about it, and subsequently the right hon. Gentleman and other senior Select Committee Chairmen suggested ways in which they should be implemented. I am committed to doing that, as is my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): I add my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman and his team, and wish them well in their important task.

Will the right hon. Gentleman give the House two assurances? First, will he assure us that the Queen's Speech will always take place, and that the Government have no desire to dispense with that important ceremonial occasion? Secondly, if Parliament is truly to be at the centre of the Government's plans, may we have an assurance that not every Bill will be timetabled?

Mr. Straw: I give an absolute assurance on the first point. I am the first Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain to sit in the House of Commons—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, Hear!"] I think it is time to give a wider audience to the full name. However, I am already in training for my role at the other end of the Corridor in the state opening, which I am told in my incoming brief must continue. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made an absolute commitment that nothing in our efforts to provide for more consultation of the draft legislative programme will detract in any way from either the formality or the importance of the state opening of Parliament by Her Majesty the Queen which takes place at the beginning of each Session.

Now I have forgotten the hon. Gentleman's second question, and sadly it is not a Freudian slip. [HON. MEMBERS: "Timetabling."] Yes, timetabling. Not every Bill is timetabled, although nowadays most Bills are. I know that that has been a matter of controversy. When I was Chairman of the Modernisation Committee we examined it in some detail, and, as a result of complaints from both sides of the House, although timetabling continues it is now much more relaxed. In most cases knives are not used for Report stages, and the time allocated for both Committee and Report is usually more than is used. However, I understand the importance of the matter, and we keep it under review.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome the Lord High Chancellor to his newly expanded post, although since he is responsible for making the

Executive more accountable, I hope that in future an hour will be provided for Justice questions.

The Prime Minister has said that the British people will be consulted on major decisions through citizens' juries. His spokesman has confirmed that the Government's review will consider whether service on such juries should be compulsory. Does the Secretary of State think that the public will welcome being forced to serve on new Labour's focus groups, and what will be the point of them if—as with public protests against hospital closures, or the 1.5 million people who signed the Downing street petition against road pricing—the Government simply ignore the jury's verdict?

Mr. Straw: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind congratulations, and I congratulate him on becoming the shadow Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain and shadow Secretary of State for Justice, which covers an important policy area.

To begin on an ecumenical note, I regard even an hour of questions as too little for this Department, and for practice for the Opposition. I have already made strong recommendations on the matter to the Patronage Secretary and the Leader of the House as we recognise that half an hour is not long enough, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for saying that, too.

On the hon. Gentleman's next question, I have been reading the *West Sussex County Times*, which reports him as saying that, so far as he is concerned, there will be a reduction in party political slanging matches. I note the standard that he has set on that.

Citizens' juries do not, and cannot, work in the same way as juries in real courts; they have to be collaborative. Citizens' juries have been used in my constituency, and the idea behind them is to draw out people's views, not as focus groups, but through a collaborative, discursive approach. They often arrive at interesting conclusions, and the purpose in having them is to take account of what they say.

Human Rights Act

2. **Mr. Peter Lilley** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the effectiveness of the Human Rights Act 1998. [150196]

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): Last year, my predecessor as Secretary of State and Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer, was asked by the Prime Minister to review the implementation of the Human Rights Act. His review was published in July 2006—I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has read every page. It concluded that the Act has had no impact on the Government's ability to fight crime, but that it has had a significant and beneficial impact on policy development.

Mr. Lilley: I am grateful to the Lord High Chancellor for his answer and welcome him to his post. Has not the decision to enshrine in law the declaration of human rights proved to be an own goal, in that it has limited the power of Government to uphold the rights and security of the people of this country? Is not the underlying problem the fact that rights are not absolutes but need to be balanced against each other, which requires political judgment and common sense, and that that is best left not to lawyers but to Parliament, which developed those human rights in the first place?

Mr. Straw: Of course rights have to be balanced by responsibilities, and that is precisely what the European convention on human rights does. As the shadow Lord Chancellor, Lord Kingsland, has pointed out, it was drafted not by some rabid radical socialist-leaning French or Italian lawyers but by Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, later Lord Kilmuir, a senior and highly respected member of the Conservative Bench. Its rights are supposed to constrain the power of the state against the individual. If the right hon. Gentleman is serious about wishing to withdraw from the European convention or to reduce rights, he must say which rights he wants reduced. Does he want the right to life to be reduced? Does he want the prohibition on torture or the right to a fair trial to be abolished? Does he want the right to marry—I know that he is concerned about such matters—to be cut out, along with respect for private and family life? It is time for Opposition Members to move away from slogan-making and instead put up or be quiet about which aspects of this great convention they wish to be repealed.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend say how he plans to extend the protection of the Human Rights Act to those who rely on privatised or contracted-out services not only in care homes but more generally, in order to put right the consequences of the YL case in the other place and to get back to what was originally intended when the Act was passed by this House?

Mr. Straw: As my hon. Friend knows, we left open as a matter for the courts the definition of a public authority to which the Act would apply. I am currently digesting the results of the decision by the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords, and I will consult my hon. Friend and his Committee about the best way forward.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment. As the only previous holder of his office not to be a member of the House of Lords was Sir Thomas More, he has quite an act to follow.

It is intolerable to members of the public that the courts should, again and again, refuse to deport people, even to places such as Afghanistan into which we have put considerable amounts of blood and treasure to get a grip, because of human rights legislation. The rights of citizens of this country must matter, too.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations and the reference to historical precedent, but I would rather not go the same way as Sir Thomas More—although one never knows in this business.

The provisions of article 3, which require that no one should be subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and their interpretation, go back way beyond the introduction and coming into force of the Act. The difficulty arises not under the Act, but under the decision of the European Court of

Human Rights in the Chahal case in 1996. The British judiciary are members of the public and they have no interest in seeing terrorists at large, but they do have an interest, because we have asked them to do so—we signed the convention and the Conservatives have supported it—in genuinely ensuring that people are not sent back to be killed or tortured. We cannot do that. The question is one of balance, and we are currently backing actions in the European Court to get it to modify the Chahal judgment, which was made in different circumstances, to provide the courts with greater flexibility.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman and his team on their appointments. I realise that he is new in his post, but I wrote to him on 5 July asking for an urgent meeting to discuss the whole question of Welsh language juries, which is a question of human rights under article 6 of the European convention on human rights. Will he please make time to see my hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams) and me before we rise for the summer recess?

Mr. Straw: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations and for giving me some notice of this question. I will of course make arrangements to see him and his colleague before the end of next week.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Secretary of State for Justice. On 3 July, the Prime Minister made an important statement on constitutional reform, involving the possibility of a new written constitution and a new Bill of Rights. Will he assure the House that any new constitution would be fully compatible with our obligations under human rights legislation, and deal not only with rights but with responsibilities?

Mr. Straw: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear that we want a debate on whether we should build on, not detract from, the European convent n on human rights and what is in the Human Rights Act 1998. We have to get it across, and the Opposition make a fair point, that the Act and the rights themselves have to be balanced by obligations, duties and responsibilities. That is an important part of the debate that my right hon. Friend has now launched.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): In the light of the answer that the Lord High Chancellor gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), will he note that there are two House of Lords cases, one of which reaffirms the sovereignty of Parliament in relation to the question of the Human Rights Act? It is embedded in the Act. Will he also note that Lord Hoffmann recently said that the questions of the balance between security and human rights should be determined by the Home Secretary because he is required to answer to Parliament? Does he also note that only the other day Lord Carlile said that he thought that there was a case for extending the detention period of 28 days? Will the Secretary of State take note—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Straw: First of all, may I say that this is an historic first? This is the first time in the 11 years that I have been answering questions that the very assiduous hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) has asked me one and not mentioned Europe—a subject that normally features even in inquiries about drains in his constituency. On the other matter, though, he is absolutely right to say that this Parliament is sovereign. That is embedded in the Human Rights Act, and in our membership of the EU. We can withdraw any time that we wish, but I am against doing so.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): The Minister will be aware that the many thousands of parents who are victims of malpractice in the family courts are prevented by law from making representations about the effectiveness of the Human Rights Act. Does he have any proposals to make it possible for such people to make representations about malpractice to Members of Parliament?

Mr. Straw: I do not have proposals at this stage, but I understand the concern that the hon. Gentleman raises and I am very happy to meet him and talk about how we deal with the problem.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): In May, the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid), who is in his place, said that human rights legislation needed modernising to protect citizens against terrorism and that, if necessary, the Government would even derogate from article 5 of the European convention on human rights to deal with terrorist suspects who abscond from control orders. Was the previous Home Secretary right, or is the new Lord High Chancellor so wedded to his Human Rights Act that he will not contemplate changes to protect the public from extremists who threaten this country and our way of life?

Mr. Straw: There is no difference between me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid) on this matter. What we all accept is that the fundamental obligations are embedded in the ECHR. Some sensible modifications to the Human Rights Act are already anticipated in our document "The Governance of Britain", which I am holding up for the House to see. As far as derogation is concerned, it is of course open to us under the convention and the Act itself to derogate, if we judge that that is necessary.

Values Statement

3. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to consult the public on a British statement of values. [150197]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Mr. Michael Wills): In the coming months, we will be starting a series of consultations, using a range of formats, to involve the British people in the formulation of the statement and to give them a decisive role in the process.

Chris Bryant: I warmly welcome the Minister to his new post, and his appointment is long overdue. Recent opinion polls suggest that the British public think that the most important British values are a sense of fair

play, a respect for minorities and the belief that everyone has the right to say precisely what they think. But has my hon. Friend watched "Little Britain" recently? Does he believe that one of the most important British values is our ability to laugh at ourselves?

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): There's a lot of them in this village, though!

Mr. Wills: I am grateful for the first words of welcome uttered by my hon. Friend, although I am not sure of the implication of his final remarks. However, I agree with everything that he has said and pay tribute to his contribution to the last of the British values that he identified. I look forward to his contribution to the consultation.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): Our heritage and marine traditions lie at the heart of our British values, so will the Minister note the disappointment, both in the House and beyond it, that neither the heritage Bill nor the marine Bill were included in the preview of the Queen's Speech? Will he and his colleagues reconsider the matter?

Mr. Wills: I note the hon. Gentleman's question, and he is very welcome to participate in the consultation. It is precisely for that purpose that we are holding it.

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): Is not participatory democracy one of the great British values? Will the Minister recognise that the Government's Freedom of Information Act 2000 has been a great success in that regard? Given that it has caused no problems, will he and the Government consider removing some of the restrictions in the legislation that prevent information from being released?

Mr. Wills: I recognise entirely what the hon. Gentleman says. We are proud to have brought in the freedom of information legislation, which is making a substantial and significant contribution to democracy in this country. We are constantly reviewing the way it works, and I am sure that he and I will have further exchanges on that in the future.

Early Release Scheme

4. **Mr. Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): When he expects the early release of prisoners scheme to end. [150198]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Mr. David Hanson): The end of custody licence was introduced on 29 June. It is too early to say how long the scheme will be in operation. We are keeping the scheme under review in the light of new prison capacity coming on stream and the review by Lord Carter.

Mr. Holloway: If 25,000 prisoners are to be released 18 days early, that will give them an extra 450,000 working days. I wonder what analysis the Minister has done of how criminals will use the additional 10,800,000 hours.

Mr. Hanson: What I hope will be happening is the prevention of reoffending. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the figures for the success in preventing reoffending, he will see that the Government have beaten their target, have got more people back into work and are making Britain safer. Crime in his constituency, as in every other constituency in the country, is well down.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East) (Lab): Would my right hon. Friend accept that one of the major problems leading to the high figures for the prison population has been the complete collapse of confidence in community sentences? Will he have a look at military-style supervision systems for offenders, which might provide some answers about the way forward?

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend is right in the sense that we need to build confidence in community sentences and I will certainly look at the suggestions that he has made. However, under this Government, we have more prison places, more community sentences and less reoffending. That is a record to be proud of.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): I note what the Minister says, but he must accept that what lies behind the early release problem is the unprecedented rise in the prison population, which is partly the result of the Government's failure to predict the results of their own policies. I am thinking, for example, of the indefinite public protection sentences. Lying behind that point is a question that relates to the Government's overall policy. Do the Government agree with the statement of the former Prime Minister that the size of the prison population is an indication of the success of the Government's criminal justice policy, or would the Minister now concede what everybody else knows—that it is a sign of its failure?

Mr. Hanson: Like the hon. Gentleman, I want to see the prison population reduced—by means of both reductions in crime and changes in sentencing policy. I want to see more community sentences, because they have a real effect on preventing reoffending. We have approximately 80,000 people in prison today. I want to see the figure reduced, but we are building more prison places because, inexorably, there will be people who need to be in prison. We need to protect the public and we need to ensure that we have strong community sentences.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend not understand that the victims of crime do not understand why prisoners are being rewarded with early release? Will he look to extending the prison capacity as quickly as possible, but will he also recognise that people with mental health problems may not be in the appropriate place, which will free up some prison places?

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend will know that a couple weeks ago we announced an extra 9,500 prison places. He will also know that we have a strong record on preventing reoffending. It will be of interest to him that—in contrast to when the Conservative party was in power—under the Labour Government more people are spending longer in prison. The average was 25.9 months in 2005, compared with 20 months in 1995. We are making sure that prison is an appropriate

place for dangerous, sexual and violent offenders and we are ensuring that there are community sentences wherever possible.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): May I join others in welcoming the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to their new positions? Has he had any discussions with the Northern Ireland Office about the impact of the early release scheme for prisoners in Northern Ireland, in terms of the rates of reoffending that occurred there when people were released early and the impact on victims and their families, who saw people released before they had served their due time in prison?

Mr. Hanson: I am in discussion with my colleagues in Northern Ireland. This scheme applies only to England and Wales at the moment. My colleague the Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office and I are in constant discussion. Yesterday we had a meeting on how to prevent reoffending in Northern Ireland and throughout the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Is the Minister aware that more than 50 per cent. of prisoners are repeat offenders, that adult and young offenders released from custody are reoffending at rates of 67 and 75 per cent., and that 50 per cent. of offenders do not even get to court, and therefore never have a chance to go to prison? Is that a record he is proud of?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. and learned Gentleman and I share a common objective, which is to reduce the amount of reoffending, and to reduce the number of people in prison. I wish that he would talk to his colleague the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis), who says that he wants to build more and more prison places and put more and more people in prison, and that he will spend what it takes to do so. I think that the hon. and learned Gentleman needs to have a discussion with his right hon. Friend, rather than with me, as we more or less agree on that topic.

Reoffending Rates

5. **Mr. Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce reoffending rates. [150199]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Mr. David Hanson): Reducing reoffending is a key priority for the Ministry of Justice. The National Offender Management Service is committed to reducing reoffending by 10 per cent. by the end of the decade. We will deliver that through our cross-Government strategy to reduce reoffending, and we are supported by the significant increase in investment since 1997.

Mr. Dunne: Despite the extraordinary complacent remark made by the Minister in an answer to a previous question, reoffending rates have soared over the past 10 years, and among 18 to 20-year-olds, the reoffending rate is 78 per cent. What will he do to bring down the overcrowding in young offender institutions such as Stoke Heath in Shropshire, which I visited on Monday, which now contains 30 per cent. more young adults than it was built to contain?

Mr. Hanson: I am sorry to disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but he should look at the figures for the past 10 years. The Labour Government set a target to reduce reoffending by 5 per cent., but we have increased that target to nearly 7 per cent. In his own constituency, thanks to investment made by the Labour Government in those 10 years, crime is down by 22 per cent. I will certainly consider the issues of overcrowding in prisons and young offender institutions, but I will not take any lessons from his party; when it was in government, crime rose.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [150180] **Martin Salter** (Reading, West) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 18 July.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): Before listing my engagements, I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in expressing our profound condolences to the family and friends of Guardsman Daryl Hickey of 1st Battalion the Grenadier Guards, who was killed in Afghanistan last week. He died doing vital work in the service of our country. We owe him, and others who have lost their lives, a deep debt of gratitude.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings today.

Martin Salter: With eight out of 10 prisoners in some prisons testing positive for class A drugs, the Prime Minister will be acutely aware of how drugs and drug addiction are fuelling crime in our constituencies. However, will he also acknowledge that many of us are concerned that people who suffer from multiple sclerosis and other debilitating conditions have been waiting since 2001 for the cannabis-based medicine Sativex to be licensed for use in the UK, as it is in Canada? Is it not about time that we had a drugs policy that does not criminalise the sick, but tackles the drugs that do the most harm?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I would like to pay tribute to the work that he has done on behalf of MS sufferers in all parts of the country. The use of the drug Sativex is now under review by the medical authorities. I can also say to him that next week my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will publish a consultation document to review our drugs strategy for the future. She will be asking the public to comment on new ways in which we can improve drugs education in this country, give support to people undergoing treatment—we have doubled the numbers in treatment, but we need to do more—and give support to communities that want to chase out drug dealers. As part of that consultation—the Cabinet discussed this yesterday—the Home Secretary will consult on whether it is right that cannabis should be moved from class C to class B.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Guardsman Daryl Hickey, who was killed in Afghanistan on Thursday. He died serving our country.

Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister started letting prisoners out of jail early under his early release scheme. Can he tell us how many prisoners have been let out, and how many of them were convicted of violent offences?

The Prime Minister: The figures were given to the House on Monday by the Secretary of State for Justice. I think it is true to say that around 1,700 people were released. It is also true to say that they included nobody who was serving a sentence for a serious violent offence, nobody who was subject to the registration requirements of the Sex Offenders Act 1997, nobody who had previously escaped from custody, nobody who had breached temporary release conditions and nobody currently serving a sentence for failing to return after temporary release. All those conditions, and others, meant that people were not released.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister needs a new briefer. Three hundred and forty-four of those criminals were convicted of violent offences. Those are the facts. What the Prime Minister has effectively said means that 25,000 prisoners will be released early this year, all from a Government who told us that they would be tough on crime. It has been alleged that there are cases where police and probation staff objected to the release of individual criminals because of the risk that they posed, but they were overruled. Has that happened?

The Prime Minister: I must correct the right hon. Gentleman. We said at the time that when we released people early—and remember, it was 18 days early, not a year, not six months, not nine months, but 18 days early—nobody who was serving a sentence for a serious violent offence would be released. We made it absolutely clear at the time, and it is disingenuous for the Leader of the Opposition now to come back and say the opposite. On any individual cases of probation that he raises, I assure him that the Justice Secretary will investigate, but let us remember that we also announced at the time—and the Conservative party must tell us what its views are on this—*[Interruption.]* Oh yes. We also announced at the time that we had increased the number of prison places by another 1,800. That is on top of the extra 8,000 places, which means that we have increased the number of prison places in this country from 60,000 to 90,000. We have provided resources for 140,000 police and 16,000 community support officers. At no time have the Opposition said that they would match us in the resources that we are providing.

Mr. Cameron: Those 344 criminals who were released had been convicted of violent offences, such as violence against the person. Is the Prime Minister saying that he does not think that is serious? On whether police and probation staff have been overruled, Harry Fletcher, one of the leaders of the National Association of Probation Officers, said that in many cases probation and prisons staff—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the Leader of the Opposition speak.

Mr. Cameron: He said that in many cases probation and prisons staff objected to the release of violent criminals but they had been overruled. Why did not the Prime Minister know about that?

The Prime Minister: I have said to the right hon. Gentleman that I will ask the Justice Secretary to write to him on the matter of individual cases, but the terms on which people were released were made very clear at the time. Prisoners serving a sentence for serious violent offences, sex offences, escaping custody, breaching temporary release—we listed the 15 conditions that would not allow people to be released, and it is wrong for the right hon. Gentleman to come back and say that we have broken the word that we gave to the House of Commons.

Mr. Cameron: So the Prime Minister had no idea that prison staff and probation staff were being overruled and that criminals were being released on to our streets when those staff thought that they posed a real risk. That is the truth. Some of the criminals who have been released went on to commit further offences. What would the Prime Minister say to the victims of those criminals who were released early?

The Prime Minister: I have investigated what has happened as a result of the Home Secretary's statement on Monday. Everybody who was released was released after debate within the Prison Service and the probation service about what should happen, and it is wrong for the right hon. Gentleman to say that Ministers did not listen to any discussion that took place. *[Interruption.]* On the issues of future policy that he raises, I come back to tell him—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister must be heard as well.

The Prime Minister: I come back to what I said. On Monday, the Home Secretary made a statement and listed the number of people who had been released, then listed the number of people who had been recalled. Many people who have been recalled have come back as a result. I understand that less than 1 per cent. of those who have been released have been recalled, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that the figures are very low.

Mr. Cameron: So that's it. The Prime Minister has nothing to say to the victims of the prisoners whom he released early. The very least that they should expect is an apology from the Prime Minister. He says that discussions go on about whether those criminals should be released. He does not know what is going on. The probation circular sent to the probation service states on page 2:

"The Probation Service is not required to conduct a risk assessment or an accommodation check prior to a prisoner's release".

He does not know what is going on in his prisons. The Government told us repeatedly that the scheme would be a temporary measure. Can the Prime Minister confirm that it definitely will not become a permanent part of our criminal justice system?

The Prime Minister: We will continue to review it. Early release is not something that happened just under the Labour Government—it happened on two major occasions under the Conservative Government. The right hon. Gentleman raises the question of the individual assessment. Each person who was released was assessed against the criteria that I have read out to him. As for anybody who has committed any offences, yes, I regret it if anything has happened, but let us look at the evidence that is before us before we draw conclusions, as he is trying to do. The new announcement that we made a few weeks ago was that we were building more prison places. I thought that the right hon. Gentleman would support that. The new announcement that we made in recent months was that we are going to increase community policing. There are now going to be neighbourhood policing units in every town and city of England. He should be supporting that. Unfortunately, his shadow Chancellor says that there is no more money for law and order. That is the position of the Conservative party.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister does not know what is going on in the prisons and he does not even know what his own Ministers are saying. Last week, the Lord Chancellor said that this could become a permanent feature of the criminal justice system. This Prime Minister does not know who is being released, does not know whether they are violent offenders, cannot tell us whether probation officers have been overruled, does not know how many crimes have been committed, will not apologise to the victims of those crimes, and will not tell us how long this scheme will last. Is it not the case that when it comes to this Government and law and order, it is the same old broken promises, the same old incompetence, and the same old Labour?

The Prime Minister: This from the party under which crime doubled, the party under which the number of police officers fell, and the party whose shadow Chancellor has said—*[Interruption.]* They should listen to what the shadow Chancellor is telling them. He said:

"lots of Conservatives...come up to me and say we've really got to put more money into"—

this and that—

"we need more soldiers, we need more police, and so on. Now those are all very good things but they do cost money and part of our discipline, part of the test of whether we are ready for government is whether we can resist these additional draws on public expenditure".

That is the Conservative party—all talk, no real policy. He said he was the future once, and all he can do is talk about the past. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Helen Southworth (Warrington, South) (Lab): May I ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister if he will meet children's charities that work with children who run away or go missing from home or care so that we can find out how we can better protect those children from harm?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has taken up the case of the hundreds of runaway children who, during the course of the year, go missing and cannot be found, and the fact that we do not have properly co-ordinated services to do so. I agree that we should encourage all local authorities to take this more seriously, and we need a national system by which we can find missing children. I look forward to meeting children's charities, as I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families will do in future, to talk about this very grave problem.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's expression of sympathy and condolence?

Yesterday's Rowntree report confirmed that the gap between the rich and the poor is as wide as it has been for 40 years. How does the Prime Minister propose to deal with that unfairness?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept this. What has happened in the past few years is that the number of people taken out of poverty as a result of the policies of this Government has risen very substantially. While child poverty trebled under the previous Conservative Government, it is coming down now. While pensioner poverty was very high, it is coming down now. I accept that in every advanced industrial country inequality is a major issue, but I have to read to the right hon. and learned Gentleman what Professor Danny Dorling, the co-author of the report said:

"we...looked at the groups who were...the poorest of the poor...that group had actually reduced in size in the last ten years and it also became less geographically concentrated. And that almost certainly is due to Government policies."

Sir Menzies Campbell: There are people earning less than £18,500 who now pay more tax as a result of the Prime Minister's last Budget. Why does not he close the loophole for the very rich that he has created and use that money to cut tax for low and middle-income families? Why not legislate for the many, not the few?

The Prime Minister: The one thing that would happen to people earning less than £18,500 under Liberal party policies is that they would be worse off. The reason for that is that each one of all the major measures we have taken—the new deal, tax credits and the child trust fund—was opposed by the Liberal party.

Q2. [150181] **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): . The political situation in Darfur is too fragile, and the humanitarian crisis too dire, to contemplate any further delays in deploying the hybrid peacekeeping force. Will the Prime Minister tell the House the approach he will deploy at the United Nations to show whether our Government have the spirit and soul to lead a global campaign to extirpate the spreading moral stain that threatens utterly to engulf this region of Africa?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has taken a major interest in Darfur, and he will know that the International Development Secretary is in Darfur at the moment looking at the situation on the ground. As a result of the conflict in Darfur, 200,000 people have died. There are 2 million people who are homeless and displaced as a result of it, and 4 million people who would starve but for food aid.

It is urgent that the international community reach an agreement on the appropriate response. We are sponsoring a United Nations resolution to bring an African Union and UN force into the region as quickly as possible. I believe that, even before that force arrives, there should be a cessation of violence on the ground, and the President has a responsibility for making that happen. We would then be prepared to give emergency economic aid so that the people of this area are given the chance of a better livelihood, but we are prepared to take further sanctions against the Government and people in that regime if they do not cease the violence, stop the militias and make sure that people have a decent living standard in a region that for too long has suffered from poverty, famine and war.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): May I ask the Prime Minister if he will personally take time out of this busy day, first, to confirm that it is still the policy of his Government, as it has been of previous Governments, not to deport people to countries that have the death penalty, and in which they are in danger from the death penalty? Is he aware that in nine hours, this country is going to deport a Christian lady, Samar Razavi, who apostasised in Iran and fled that country? She is under a death warrant from Iran, but has been refused asylum. I do not ask him to comment on asylum; will he please look at the case with an urgent view to intervention?

The Prime Minister: Of course, I will look at the case that the right hon. Lady has brought to me—we shall look at it in detail immediately. I have to say to her that it is our policy not to deport to countries where torture is being practised. We are trying to sign new agreements with individual countries where they will guarantee to repatriate people, but on the condition that there will be no torture. We have signed three agreements already, and there are many more that we wish to sign and we will try to move this matter forward. I hope that the right hon. Lady will give us all the details today so that we can follow it up.

Q3. [150182] **Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Yesterday, I held an Adjournment debate on the coroner's report into the tragic death of four cyclists from Rhyl cycling club in January 2006. The coroner made some strong recommendations. What measures can the Prime Minister take to ensure a complete review of how police call centres handle ice-related accidents and of cross-border co-operation between local authority gritting departments. What measures can he take to ensure that legal advisers, solicitors and insurance companies cannot deliberately prolong and frustrate coroners' inquiries and that there is a review into why the Crown Prosecution Service did not take action against the driver in this terrible accident?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending condolences to the families of the four cyclists who were killed in this tragic accident, which took place in January 2006. I want to pay tribute to the dignity with which those families have conducted themselves following this terrible event. It was on 27 June that the coroner raised a number of very serious concerns about what had happened, and I can reassure my hon. Friend that I will look into each of these with my ministerial colleagues. I understand that the Minister of State, Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), who has responsibility for policing, has already agreed to meet him and the families, and I was informed this morning that the Minister has also asked to meet the lead police officer for roads policing to discuss how the lessons highlighted by the coroner can best be learned. It is incumbent on us all, when a serious accident has caused such loss of life, to investigate all the circumstances and see what lessons we can learn.

Q4. [150133] **Mr. Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Over the past year, one third of all small shopkeepers have been violently attacked, often by baseball bats and knives. As the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) asked earlier, how can letting out thousands of prisoners early help those people? Do not those shopkeepers, who serve all our constituents, deserve better after 10 years of this Government?

The Prime Minister: I think that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the length of sentences for people who are convicted of those crimes has been increased. That is one of the reasons why more people are in prison, even after crime has fallen. He should know that the number of people in prison has risen from 60,000 to nearly 80,000, and that the number of prison places will increase to 90,000 in the next few years. We are increasing not only the sentences inflicted on people who commit those crimes but the prison places available. Again, I hope that he will support us, as we have increased the number of police and community support officers so that we have neighbourhood policing that enables the shopkeepers that he mentioned—and all residents—to be properly protected.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North) (Lab): The Government's policy of helping lone parents get into work has assisted thousands of families in constituencies such as mine to get out of poverty. However, for many, child care remains expensive and many employers are still reluctant to allow flexible working. What further steps will the Prime Minister take to help those parents who are trying to give their families a better life by getting off benefits and into work?

The Prime Minister: I hope that my hon. Friend's work in her constituency will be repaid by the announcement that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is about to make. It has always been our intention to get more lone parents into work, providing them with the child care and training facilities that are necessary for them to do that.

Since 1997, the number of lone parents in work has been raised by more than 200,000—it has gone from 43 per cent. to 57 per cent. of all lone parents. In the next few years, we can make enormous progress, in partnership with employers. Today, I met a group of employers, especially from the retail sector, including all the major names—ASDA, Sainsbury, Marks and Spencer, B&Q—that wish to employ lone parents and others who are currently on the inactive register. They are prepared to give them training and support into work; we are prepared to help through the new deal for lone parents. It means that we will reduce the age at which benefit is claimed by lone parents for young children

who go to school and it will be claimed as a separate benefit from income support. It also means that there are huge opportunities—perhaps 250,000—in addition to existing provision for lone parents and others to get into work.

Royal Navy

Q5. [150184] **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East) (Con): If he will make a statement on the planned size of the Royal Navy's frigate and destroyer fleet.

The Prime Minister: As we said in the White Paper that was published in July 2004, the Navy will operate a fleet of 25 destroyers and frigates. Investment in the Navy has increased from £780 million for capital equipment to £1.3 billion this year, with new investment of £6 billion planned in the next three years.

Dr. Lewis: In 2004, the then First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Alan West, now a Minister in the Prime Minister's Administration, criticised the Government for abandoning their promise in the strategic defence review to keep 32 frigates and destroyers and reducing the total to only 25. He described that as piling risk on risk. Will the Prime Minister now guarantee that there will be no further reductions from the total of 25 frigates and destroyers?

The Prime Minister: Since those announcements, we have announced the biggest programme of investment in our Navy for future years. The hon. Gentleman knows that £6 billion of investment in the next three years is a major commitment to our Navy. We look forward to making an announcement soon on the future of aircraft carriers. I believe that we are fulfilling our commitment to create a modern Navy for the future.

I just repeat the shadow Chancellor's comments:

"there are lots of Conservatives who... say we've... got to put more money into... our armed forces... part of the test of whether we're ready for government is whether we can resist those additional draws on public expenditure".

The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) had better talk to the shadow Chancellor first.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is not necessary to have a referendum before ordering two aircraft—

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is a closed question. I called the hon. Gentleman because Fairfield shipyard is in his constituency. He should ask about the carriers, not a referendum.

Mr. Davidson: As I was saying, does the Prime Minister agree that it is not necessary to have a referendum before ordering two aircraft carriers? Does he also agree that this is the forum in which an announcement should be made, with his allies—I admit that some are only recent—behind him, and, in front of him, not opponents, but potential recruits?

The Prime Minister: I am glad that my hon. Friend describes himself as an ally. I hope that we will be able to make an announcement soon on the aircraft carriers, but our commitment to future naval investment in this country is very high indeed. I believe that the future of the Navy is best safeguarded by the levels of investment that we are putting in, and I am glad that he agrees with me that there is no need for a referendum on any issue at the moment.

Engagements

Q6. [150185] **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Many of my constituents will be somewhat concerned about the Prime Minister's equivocal remarks about early release, which will probably now become a permanent feature of our criminal justice system. Was Harry Fletcher correct to point out that senior probation officers were overruled on early release decisions? Whom should one trust most: loyal, hard-working probation officers and servants of the Crown or Ministers obsessed with spin?

The Prime Minister: I have already said that the decision about early release on individuals was made against very specific criteria that were set down to the House of Commons. I repeat to the House that no prisoner who was serving a sentence for a serious violent offence was released. That was not part of the criteria that were followed. Nobody serving for a serious violent offence was released.

Q7. [150186] **Mr. Neil Turner** (Wigan) (Lab): My right hon. Friend might have noticed gaps in the Chamber last week, as hon. Members from all parts of the House played a game of tag rugby with rugby league greats, the Rugby Football Union and the Rugby Football League, to support the British Asian Rugby Association in its work to bring people from all minorities into the community through participation in sport. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Ikram Butt, Heather Taylor, who is not a teacher, and all those connected with BARA on the work that they do in bringing together people of all creeds and minorities through sport to make a cohesive community in our country?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the co-operation between the Asian and British Rugby associations. I also understand that my hon. Friend has been asked to be the sports ambassador for rugby league, and I welcome him to his new post. Participation in sport helps to promote community cohesion and we will do everything to support it, even if voices off are not.

Q8. [150187] **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): As the principal architect of the public-private partnership for London Underground, can the Prime Minister explain how £500 million was spent on lawyers and consultants to create a construction that has now collapsed, leaving the British taxpayer with £3.5 billion of bank loans and considerable uncertainty about the future of public transport in the capital?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman is saying. If Metronet pulls out, another company will be found to take its place, and another company will be found alongside the tube company that is the other private-sector company involved in the consortium. What the hon. Gentleman should remember

is that we are engaged in one of the biggest civil engineering projects that has ever been undertaken in London. We are increasing the number of people using the tube from 1 billion a year to 1.5 billion a year. We are talking about a £17 billion investment that would always be done by private construction and engineering firms. We are committed as a Government to do something that the Conservative party is not prepared to do, and that is to provide £1 billion a year of extra money for investment in the tube. The number of stations already refurbished, the number of additional trains and the number of projects under way show our commitment to investment in the London Underground. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support us in that project.

Mr. Speaker: I call Bob Marshall-Andrews.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway) (Lab): Very helpful, thank you. The Government have recently decreed that Parliamentary Private Secretaries will sit on Select Committees. Parliamentary Private Secretaries are de facto part of the Executive, and Select Committees, at least in part, are intended to scrutinise that Executive. The conflict is obvious and apparent. How does that accord with the welcome and noble sentiments that my right hon. Friend expressed two weeks ago on the independence of Parliament?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is raising an important issue, and I am sorry if we are going to lose his services in the next Parliament. He is referring to the role of Parliamentary Private Secretaries, but they will not sit on the departmental Select Committees for which they are Parliamentary Private Secretaries. I can give him that assurance.

Q9. [150188] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): According to official figures, more than 1,500 prisoners have Sky television in their own cells, five prisons have swimming pools for prisoners' use and two thirds of prisoners have keys to their own cells. Is the Prime Minister proud of that and what is he going doing to do about it?

The Prime Minister: We have increased sentences for those who commit the worst crimes. The hon. Gentleman should know that there are nearly 10,000 people in prison who are under indeterminate sentences as a result of the toughening of punishment. That is why we have raised the number of prison places from 60,000 to 80,000 and they will go up to 90,000 in the next few years. We are honouring our commitment to deal harshly with people who commit crimes.

Q10. [150189] **Mr. Jim Devine** (Livingston) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning the performance and behaviour of Greenbelt, a ground maintenance company that provides services to tens of thousands of homes throughout the UK? It charges up to £400 per household and provides little or no service. It is Farepak for homeowners. Last week, its lawyers sent a threatening letter to me and my constituent, Paula Hoogerbrugge. Paula, a single mum, has been monitoring the company's behaviour on a national basis. The lawyer also contacted her employers with a threat to silence her or get her sacked. Will the Prime Minister join me in condemning that behaviour?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for that information and I will look into the matter that my hon. Friend raises.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): In 2004, when the Prime Minister was Chancellor, a budget of £20 million for 2006-07 and £40 million for 2007-08 was announced for the drug treatment and testing programme in prisons. Since then, it has been cut to £12 million and £12.7 million respectively. Now that he is Prime Minister, will he consider revising those back to the original figures?

The Prime Minister: I have to tell the hon. Lady that since we took office there has been a big increase in the amount of drug treatment in prisons, which will continue in the next spending round.

Full Employment

12.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr. Peter Hain): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on today's Green Paper, "In work, better off: next steps to full employment". Ten years of progress under this Government have transformed work and opportunity in Britain. We have seen the longest and most sustained period of economic growth for over 200 years, the fastest falling child poverty in Europe and the highest employment in our country's history.

Today, the achievement of full employment and the eradication of child poverty are seen no longer as simply aspirational rallying calls, but as real targets that people expect to be delivered in our generation. But to achieve them, especially at a time when the global forces of economic and demographic change present new and ever greater challenges for our economy and labour market, will require a step change in our reforms.

We must reignite the jobs crusade that started in 1997 and renew the partnership between Government, employers and individuals by focusing now on those who remain furthest from the labour market and on those whose potential is untapped—on the 3 million people of working age who have been on benefit for over a year, many on incapacity benefits; on lone parents and ethnic minority groups still without the right support to work; on 16 and 17-year-olds not in education, employment or training; and on those remaining pockets of poverty and worklessness concentrated in some of our major cities, yet often close to thriving labour markets and great prosperity.

I said that we needed a step change to tackle these entrenched problems and today's Green Paper delivers it, based as it is on values and principles that go back to Beveridge and Attlee, and on to our new deal. I refer to the belief in equality and opportunity and in rights and responsibilities; to the principle of work for those who can and support for those who cannot; to the idea of working in partnership with employers; and to the belief that an active, progressive welfare system should provide people with the skills that employers need to fill some of the 600,000 vacancies that come up in our labour market each month.

The reforms will build on our progress with the national roll-out of pathways to work. They will see the development of support that is ever more personalised and responsive to the needs of individuals. They will focus on job retention and progression, not just on job entry. They will devolve power to local areas by incentivising local solutions and making the best possible use of expertise across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

We propose, first and foremost, a renewed partnership with employers to ensure that those on welfare applying for jobs have both the skills and the work attitudes that employers need, underpinned by a new jobs pledge aimed at finding opportunities for 250,000 people currently on benefit. Building on the cutting-edge local employment partnerships announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in the Budget earlier this year, major employers—in both the public and private sectors—have given a commitment to offer guaranteed job interviews for people who have been on benefit and who are ready and prepared to work. Employers will ensure that such people can compete more effectively for vacancies and have the support then to progress within the workplace, adding to last month's employer skills pledge in which 150 leading employers made a public and voluntary commitment to train all their staff to level 2 in the workplace. This will be a two-way process, however, and through the new local employment partnerships, individuals on benefit will be expected to do all that they can to help themselves prepare for work.

Our second area of reform will be to introduce a more personalised, flexible and responsive new deal, with a more integrated approach to skills and wider support for the family, but matched by new responsibilities for jobseekers to do all that they can to help themselves. Those facing particularly severe barriers to work will now get fast-tracked help, while others who have a history of long-term benefit dependency could face tougher responsibilities from the start of their claim. There will be an earlier and more focused assessment of the skills needs of those who are out of work, to inform the development of a back-to-work plan. Agreed activities will be mandatory, however, with clear sanctions for failure to comply.

Eradicating child poverty lies at the heart of the Green Paper. Following the recommendations of Lisa Harker's report last year, we are already changing Jobcentre Plus systems and targets to ensure that the delivery of our employment programmes is more family-focused. We are introducing mandatory work-focused interviews every six months for partners of jobseeker's allowance recipients with children. As with lone parents, work offers a powerful route out of poverty for many of those families.

For lone parents, we will introduce a new social contract which promotes the value of work as the best route to tackle child poverty. We know that the children of lone parents in work are more than five times more likely to be in poverty than the children of lone parents in full-time employment, and that they are three times more likely to be in poverty than the children of lone parents in part-time work. Given our record investment in improving the quality and supply of child care, together with measures to ensure that work pays, lone parents will be expected to make an eventual move into the labour market in return for new and more personalised support.

From October next year, lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 and over will no longer be entitled to income support simply because they are a lone parent. Instead, supported by the new job opportunities made available by the local employment partnerships, they will be eligible to claim jobseeker's allowance, on which they would be expected to look for suitable work in return for personalised help and support. Because we are serious about tackling child poverty, we intend that the relevant age be reduced further to seven from October 2010, backed up by the local availability of high-quality wrap-around child care.

Finally, building on the Freud report, this Green Paper makes greater use of expertise across the private, public and voluntary sectors at both national and local level. Private and voluntary sector providers already play a crucial role in delivering programmes, such as

[Mr. Peter Hain]

employment zones and the new deal, and we intend to build on that. After 12 months on jobseeker's allowance, or in some cases probably even sooner, we will move customers to a specialist return-to-work provider, who will offer an intensive outcome-focused service, funded on the basis of results; we will push forward with a City strategy, offering local consortiums of providers new funding and flexibilities in return for outcome-based payments; and we will pilot an approach where providers who are successful in moving people into sustained employment are rewarded with increased funds to invest in further activity.

The publication of our proposals today will start a 15-week consultation process. We encourage contributions from both sides of the House and from all those who share our commitment to delivering full employment in Britain. The contrast with 1997 could not be greater: then, record unemployment and the worst child poverty in Europe; today, 2.6 million more people in jobs, more women, more lone parents and more disabled people in work than ever before, and already 600,000 children lifted out of poverty. We must now rise further to the challenge of going further.

The Green Paper lays the foundation for the eradication of child poverty; it builds on the progress that we have made in extending the right to work to all; and in reaching out to the hardest to help, it aims to offer true social mobility and social justice for every individual. I commend it to the House.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for observing the usual courtesies in providing me with an advance copy of the statement. What a shame it is, though, that he did not observe the courtesies that were promised to the House when the new Prime Minister took over less than three weeks ago. We were told then that major policy announcements would be made in the House and not the media, as you have so often demanded, Mr. Speaker, so let me start by asking the Secretary of State why details of the statement were on BBC breakfast television this morning. Is this just a one-man rebellion by the Secretary of State against his new leader, or is it just that the promises made by our new Prime Minister have a shelf-life of only a fortnight?

The statement contains much that all of us can agree on. That is hardly surprising, as parts of it, such as the changed approach for lone parents, are things that we have already argued for—but with this Government, nothing is ever quite what it seems. For a start, there is a distinct feeling of déjà vu in all of this. This is the Government's 11th announcement in 10 years about getting people off benefits and back into work. The last Green Paper was published less than 18 months ago. At that time, the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge), was scathing about the Government's record. She said:

> "I think that the whole system has left people languishing on benefit... We need to provide the infrastructure of support that helps people break down their barriers and enables them to exercise their rights. So far we have done sweet nothing."

Well, it is now a little over a year later, and what has happened? I think that the House would agree, to judge from today's employment statistics, that the answer is still sweet nothing.

The number of single parents stuck on benefits is barely changed on a year ago. According to the Secretary of State's own figures, 7.93 million people of working age in this country are economically inactive, and that figure is rising, as is youth unemployment. The Government's response is to publish yet another Green Paper—another set of headlines to try to reassure people that Ministers are actually trying to do something, while in the real world too many people are being left behind in our society.

Last year, the Government asked David Freud, chief executive of the Portland Trust, to make recommendations about how to tackle the blight of economic inactivity in this country. His report sets out a radical agenda for change in the way that we help people off benefits and into work. The last Secretary of State said of the report, back in March:

> "David Freud's report presents a compelling case for future reform."

We agree with him, but the new Prime Minister clearly does not. He gave David Freud short shrift when they met. In April, a leaked letter from the then Chief Secretary said:

> "As the chancellor made clear, it is not possible to develop or pilot a new funding model in the immediate future".

So much for the Government making real use of external advice, or the former Chancellor's big tent. It is obvious that while the Prime Minister is perfectly happy to get in external advice to help him with public relations, he clearly has absolutely no intention of actually using that advice. Let me ask the Secretary of State why the Prime Minister has ordered so much of the Freud report to be watered down. How much extra funding does he really have to implement these changes?

The truth is that after 10 years of broken promises on welfare reform, we still have more than 750,000 lone parents on benefits. We have far more—16 per cent. more—young people who are not in education, employment or training than in 1997, despite all the billions of pounds that the Government have spent on the new deal. Today's figures show that youth unemployment is getting worse. Despite years of promises, we still have more people on incapacity benefit than in 1997. The Secretary of State talked about falling child poverty, but I put it to him that his Department's statistics show that the figures for child poverty in the UK have been rising over the past year.

Neither this Government nor this Prime Minister have shown any sign of being able to get to grips with these problems. Their solution is always to launch yet another consultation, yet another Green Paper, yet more legislation and yet more initiatives, but they never actually get the job done. The truth is that we face a massive social challenge in Britain today. After 10 years in office, there is no real sign that the Government have any idea of what to do about it.

Mr. Hain: I could not disagree more strongly with the rhetorical end to the hon. Gentleman's response. First, let me say that I gave no interviews before making this statement to the House. The details about

the publication of the Green Paper have been given to the House before anyone else—certainly the media—has received them. Many of the details that appeared in bits and pieces in the media this morning were wrong.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to trumpet today's fantastic employment figures, which show record employment, unemployment down, and the number of people on benefits falling. Since he probed me, let me remind him of the figures. Employment is now at more than 29 million, which is 93,000 up on the quarter and 180,000 up on the year. International Labour Organisation-measured unemployment is down. The jobseeker's allowance numbers are down by 91,000, and the number of people on incapacity benefits is down by 38,000, which can be compared with the miserable record under the Tories when it kept rising. The number is now at its lowest level for more than seven years. The number for lone parents is down by 3,000 on the previous year. There are now 317,000 more lone parents in work than there were when we came to power in 1997. I will happily talk about our record any time that the hon. Gentleman likes, including in relation to today's very good employment figures.

The hon. Gentleman made some points about youth unemployment, although they were not specific. Actually, youth unemployment has been all but eradicated—*[Interruption.]* However, as I identified in my statement—this is also identified in the Green Paper—there is an issue in relation to 16 and 17-year-olds who are not necessarily in training, education or work. They need more intensive support, and that is precisely what we are offering them in co-operation with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills so that they are given the opportunity of gaining skills and jobs in the future.

The hon. Gentleman asked about our response to the Freud report. I would have thought that he would welcome our response—I would not be surprised if the report's author welcomed our response as well. Let us look at the detail. The report recommended a change to the way in which we encourage lone parents into work. We have agreed and taken that change forward. A change was recommended on using the more specialist expertise that is available in the private and voluntary sectors, as well as the public sector. After 12 months, we have adopted that approach. In some cases, we did so before 12 months, as I said in my statement—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is heckling me, but if he had listened carefully, he would know that in some cases that can take place before the 12-month period.

We have not gone for the big, regional private monopoly provider, because there was a strong response from stakeholders participating in the Freud report consultation that suggested that that was not necessarily the preferred model. Many private sector providers objected to a single regional monopoly provider, because if it failed the whole region would fail with it, so they said that we ought to look at provision in a more flexible way. This is a consultation document: we want to deliver the programmes and to get the best possible support for those who need and want to come off benefit and into work. That is available in the private sector—we want to take advantage of that—but it is available, too, in other ways.

The statement and the Green Paper are a response, too, to the important report by Lisa Harker on child poverty, to the Leitch report on skills, and to the important report by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. We are not just responding to the Freud report, although it is important and will inform our work in future.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North) (Lab): Earlier, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State referred to the social contract for 250,000 jobs, but as I understand it, a large slice of those jobs is in the retail sector, which has an employee turnover rate of about 25 per cent., rising to 34 per cent. at Sainsbury. That programme needs to be revisited if it is to be sustainable. As for child poverty, more than 300,000 children are not living with their parents for whatever reason, but with other family members. The system does not cater for them at all, and very little assistance is offered to their supporting families, but it is a serious child poverty problem.

Mr. Hain: As ever, my hon. Friend, who has authority and expertise in this area and who chairs the Work and Pensions Committee, has raised some important issues. The issue of the 300,000 children is important, and we should like to work with him and his colleagues to try to make sure that we can get that right, because there is an important problem to overcome and a challenge to meet.

On the question of the retail sector in local employment partnerships, the Prime Minister and I, along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform, met a number of employers this morning at No. 10 Downing street who represent more than 30 companies that have signed up to our local employment partnerships so far—the number is increasing all the time. They included important national retailers such as Debenhams, Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury's, as well as Network Rail, security companies and other organisations that have signed up to the partnership with Government.

It is true—this was one of the points made by the retailers' representatives this morning—that retailers tend to have a high turnover, partly because they attract many students at certain times, such as the pre-Christmas period. However, they find that when they can get someone through Jobcentre Plus—off benefits, in many cases—such people tend to stay. Working with us is therefore attractive, as it will help to make sure that many of those individuals have the opportunity and dignity that comes with work, and receive the support, including child care in the case of parents, that enables them to work, which they have not been able to do in the past.

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance notice of his statement. Does he agree that, despite suggestions that all parties are interested in this agenda, it is astonishing that the official Opposition refused the opportunity to repeat the statement in the other place?

We share the Secretary of State's objective of ending child poverty, but is he not aware that child poverty has gone up in the past year, not down? Is he not aware that

[Danny Alexander]

the employment rate has gone down in the past year, not up, and that it is no higher now than it was at the peak of the last economic cycle? Is he not aware that inequality is rising, not falling?

We welcome David Freud's proposals to move the benefit rules for lone parents closer to those in the rest of the European Union, but does the Secretary of State agree that he must address, too, the huge problem of child care availability which is the major barrier to work for that group? Is it not very hasty indeed to go further to the age of seven without addressing those child care issues and without allowing time for a proper evaluation of the reduction to the age of 12?

The Government must tackle the shameful fact that after 10 years in office 2.7 million people on incapacity benefit have still not received the help that they need. We welcome the long-overdue focus on building relationships with employers, but David Freud's most significant contribution was on the funding of welfare support to the hardest-to-help groups through three-year contracts. Does the Secretary of State agree that such long-term funding is essential to enable the private and voluntary sectors, which he rightly praised, to deliver for those groups? Will he confirm that the Treasury objected to the long-term funding model proposed by Freud, and that without that funding it will be much harder to provide the personal support into work for those people who need and want that help most?

Freud made it clear in his review that the byzantine complexity of our benefits system is a major disincentive to work. He is right. Why will the Government not move faster towards his recommendation of a single system of working-age benefits? What steps has the Secretary of State taken to implement Freud's proposals that Jobcentre Plus should become a one-stop shop for all benefits and tax credits? Britain today is disfigured by inequality and by concentrations of worklessness. By watering down Freud's key recommendations in a Green Paper that took longer to write than Freud took to write his own report, today's statement misses a huge opportunity to deliver extra help to those people who need it most.

Mr. Hain: To pick up the hon. Gentleman's last point on the simplification of the benefits system, we are still considering the best way forward, as it is an important issue. However, there are many difficult problems. David Freud explored the notion of a single benefit system, and found that none of the options was straightforward—something that the hon. Gentleman did not mention. A recent paper by the Institute of Public Policy Research highlighted the costs of a single benefit system. We are still looking at the proposal, but we must proceed with a great deal of care.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about long-term funding. Obviously, there is a comprehensive spending review time frame, but clearly we want more certainty, which is why we are looking at the way in which we provide contracts so that they can take into account such things and are outcome-focused, too. We should not just provide people with a contract and that is it: it should be more outcome and results-focused—a point that is made, he will agree, by the Freud report, and one of the many points that we have picked up.

As for the hon. Gentleman's point about child care, I am not sure that he listened carefully to what I had to say. As I provided him with a copy of my statement, he might have checked it out in advance. We are linking the measure, especially for lone parents, for whom we start to bring the age down to seven years old by October 2010, to the availability of child care. If we reach the targets that we have set, there will be pre-school and after-school child care arrangements, and high-quality wrap-around child care. The child tax credit system is important, and there is more support for children and child care than ever before in the history of this country.

This is about providing lone parents with an opportunity that many of them crave and want, so we need support arrangements to enable them to take advantage of that opportunity and lift themselves and their children out of the poverty in which far too many of them are still stuck. The truth is that we have lifted people out of poverty in greater millions in recent times, and certainly compared with the previous Government. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman welcomed that. We have made a start on tackling inequality by that route, and we have provided, too, the highest level of employment ever in the history of this country.

Danny Alexander: What about the rate?

Mr. Hain: The truth is that more people have come on to the labour market in the past year than ever before, yet employment has still been rising, and unemployment is still falling—*[Interruption.]* I do not mind the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) heckling me—he is welcome to do so—but he should compare our record as a Government, which is a proud record on employment, with his miserable record on employment, especially in areas outside the south-east where unemployment was steep and long-term and many people disappeared on to the dole, never to have any hope or prospect of a job. That is the record that we are now seeking to replace and improve. There are big challenges ahead, which is why the Green Paper signposts the way to meet them.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that employment in the northern region was decimated under the Conservative party. He will also know that the new deal introduced by our Government has enabled 240,000 people to find work in the region. However, we still have a problem: we have under-employment, a skills gap and a percentage of people who are still registered unemployed.

During the consultation, will the Department be prepared to accept information from organisations such as Blind People's Voice—whose programme Visage helps blind and partially sighted people into work—and TTP, which is highly successful in providing employment for skilled people in Teesside? Will my right hon. Friend also bear it in mind that many thousands of people in the northern region still feel thoroughly unconfident? We need a new deal programme that will encourage young and middle-aged people to believe that they have talents, and that we want to see them in employment.

Mr. Hain *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We are dealing with a statement, and we must have supplementary questions, not speeches. That sounded too much like a speech.

Mr. Hain: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. As one who represents a part of south Wales with much of the same legacy of the terrible Tory years, I know that we must continue to tackle it.

We will work with my hon. Friend, and with everyone who wants to work with us in all parts of the House, to try to make this programme work. We certainly intend to conduct our consultation on a regional basis, and I hope that my hon. Friend will work with us in the northern region. We also intend to work with organisations such as Blind People's Voice and TTP. It is important that we get the programme right.

I remind the House that there are still big challenges to be met. There are still 4.5 million people on benefit, many of whom want to work and have the potential to do so. If we are to reach the 80 per cent. employment target that we have set to make our economy truly globally competitive for the future, realising that ambition will require 1 million fewer claimants on incapacity benefit, and 300,000 more lone parents and 1 million more older people in work. That is our ambition: not to go backwards into a failed Tory past, but to provide a successful future for Britain under Labour.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): May I press the Secretary of State a little further on his proposal to end the entitlement to income support of lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over simply because they are lone parents? I suspect many people understand that there is a natural change of gear when a child enters secondary school that may provide more time for parents to find jobs, but why do the Government propose to lower the age to seven, when there is no such natural change of gear? What is the thinking behind the age of seven, rather than six, eight or some other age?

Mr. Hain: This is an opportunity programme, not a "big stick" programme. As I have said, under this Government there are over 300,000 more lone parents in work than in the past. They are doing better than ever before, and they have been able to lift their children out of poverty as well as taking for themselves all the advantages and dignity that come with work.

In our judgment, moving the age to seven—given the correct child support arrangements, along with support for parents that enables them to work in a way that protects their own interests and those of their children—presents a big opportunity. The point is that most of those people want to work. I think that provided that the circumstances are right, and—as we made clear in the Green Paper—provided that child care support is available, from 8 am pre-school to 6 pm post-school, lone parents who wish to work when their children reach the age of seven should be given the opportunity to do so. They should then move not from income support to nothing, but from income support to jobseeker's allowance. That will give them a chance to make progress in a work-based environment, with regular interviews and all the opportunities that that brings.

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's localised and personalised approach. It has proved effective in pathways to work pilot schemes around the country, especially in helping people off incapacity benefit and into work. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that whereas large voluntary sector organisations may well have the infrastructure and capacity to deliver such programmes in partnership with the Government and others, we should not lose sight of what small voluntary sector organisations can offer, particularly in local areas? Will he ensure that they are not squeezed out of the system?

Mr. Hain: I will certainly do that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: many small voluntary organisations, especially in local areas, know their areas well, and often harness local people's potential, expertise and commitment to their communities. Far from being squeezed out, they should have more opportunities as a result of our approach, which—generally after 12 months, and in some cases earlier—will give them a greater stake in making progress and thus helping many more people into work.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC): The Secretary of State is right to stress that child care is crucial to the age reductions to 12 and seven, but he will know that it is often a problem in rural areas, especially when the market has failed and the private sector simply cannot provide. What steps will he take to ensure that rural areas are given particular attention before the age reductions come into force?

Mr. Hain: Child care places—places in children's centres, or pre-school or after-school places—are a matter for the Welsh Assembly Government, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency as in mine. We intend to work closely with that Government, and with the Scottish and Northern Ireland Executives, although in Northern Ireland employment programmes are not covered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Rural areas do suffer from problems such as those that the hon. Gentleman has described. We need to proceed carefully. The extra obligations that will apply to those coming off incapacity benefit, or income support in the case of lone parents, must be matched with opportunities—and, for those with young children, child care support, so that they can work in the way that they wish while ensuring that their children are looked after properly.

Flexible working is important to lone parents in particular. We were told this morning by the large retailers, including Sainsbury, that their tremendously variable hours were ideal for lone parents, even at weekends when family support is generally more available.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I assure the Secretary of State that there will be considerable support for his proposals, at least on this side of the House. Does he not admit, however, that in the light of the Government's record creation of new jobs since 1997, the movement from benefit to work has been

[Mr. Frank Field]

modest, to put it mildly? During the past three years 2 million people have come to this country, practically all of them to work, yet the number moving from benefit to work is minor. Does the Secretary of State think that he can achieve his employment target if we continue an open-borders policy?

Mr. Hain: I do not think that we have an open-borders policy. The interesting truth is that although over the past year a significant number of people, mostly from central and eastern European countries, have come to work in Britain—often bringing skills with them—the claimant count has fallen. The two elements are therefore not necessarily at odds with each other. However, in the new work environment and given the challenges that I described earlier—the need to achieve an 80 per cent. employment rate, and the number of people whom we need to take off benefit—we must continue our efforts. I look forward to hearing my right hon. Friend's views, and to his assistance.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I share the Government's wish to return the work-inactive to work and their interest in doing so, but I am just as concerned about those who are currently losing their jobs. In my constituency, AstraZeneca, the international pharmaceutical business, is shedding 700 manufacturing jobs over the next three years, and Capital One is closing entirely its home loan brokerage business, mainly because of global competition, high costs and increased regulation. I know that the Secretary of State is concerned about such matters, so will he seek to do something about increased regulation and business costs, which are forcing companies to close and people to lose jobs?

Mr. Hain: I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman has long taken a close interest in manufacturing not only in his constituency, but generally. Of course, any closures are regrettable. I do not wish to make a party point, but it is a fact that when there were job losses in the 1980s and early 1990s people were just thrown on to benefit, whereas nowadays Jobcentre Plus ensures that there is a rapid response to any closure and that we work with the employers and individuals involved, and in most cases almost everyone finds a new job as a result. That is what is needed in respect of the cases the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Over the past 10 years, when we have been in office, although globalisation pressures have intensified, increasing numbers of people have been entering new jobs and gaining new skills, supported by our employment programmes. Therefore, we can offer employment optimism for the future, despite the closures and job losses that inevitably occur, given competitive pressures.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): I am sure that most Members support the Green Paper's general thrust of working towards achieving full employment, but I have a question about how single parents with children over the age of 12 will be dealt with under the proposals. Many single parents in my constituency perform a dual role, in that they also look after elderly parents. That is particularly prevalent in former mining areas because of the legacy of that industry. Do the Government intend to make single parents who also care for elderly relatives seek work?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend raises an important point, with which I am familiar as I, too, represent a constituency that is largely a former mining area—in a few places it is still a mining area. Such areas face particular problems, such as high levels of incapacity benefit owing to industrial injury and the need to care for elderly parents, which is often performed by single parents. We must and will have personalised responses; it is made clear in the Green Paper that that will be a cornerstone of our policy. There will not be a universal application of a rigid programme, but instead we will look at each person as an individual and make sure that they have the support they need. Many of them might not be able to work, perhaps for the reasons my hon. Friend describes, and support will continue to be provided while they are on benefit. However, we will assist those who can work to do so.

Steve Webb (Northavon) (LD): Becoming a lone parent—perhaps after a difficult separation—can be traumatic for both parent and children. Will a new single parent, who might be feeling bereaved after a separation, within days also feel pressured to seek work when they should instead be spending time with their children, who will also be feeling the bereavement of separation? How flexible will the system be? Will such single parents from day one feel under pressure, or even suffer benefit sanctions, if they do not go straight out to look for a job?

Mr. Hain: There will be no question of sanctions applying from day one, especially in such circumstances. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has given me an opportunity to put that on the record. When, for example, a father suddenly leaves or a parent dies, the lone parent's primary desire will be to look after the children, who will need special support and help at such times. Jobcentre Plus and the wider programme will ensure that those wishes and needs are met. I genuinely want such issues to be fed into the consultation by the hon. Gentleman and others—although we have anticipated the specific point he raises—so that we ensure we get the programme right.

Our programme is ambitious. It must be an opportunity programme. It will not seek to force lone parents with young children to go into work under any circumstances. The children's interests must be paramount, as must fighting child poverty. We can get the programme right, but that requires there to be a much more personalised form of support than previously.

Mr. George Mudie (Leeds, East) (Lab): Financed by windfall utility taxes, in the first four years of the Labour Government unemployment in my constituency was halved. However, in the last six years as the funds have run out the unemployment level has stayed the same and is now rising. I will warmly welcome the statement and the Green Paper if the new ideas and initiatives are backed up with new finance. Without that, nothing will change. Will the Secretary of State confirm that new money will be available to finance the new initiatives?

Mr. Hain: I recognise what my hon. Friend says, especially in respect of cities. In cities such as London and Leeds there are still pockets of poverty and worklessness, sometimes cheek by jowl with very high

house prices and many jobs and great prosperity. We must tailor programmes to reach those who are not benefiting from the general prosperity. However, let me add to my hon. Friend that every day 4,000 jobs are delivered through Jobcentre Plus and that there are more than 600,000 vacancies in Britain at any one time. I do not claim that they are all in his constituency—they evidently are not. We need to make sure that we provide the support that he wants.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Secretary of State said that he wants to have a system of support that is

"ever more personalised and responsive to the needs of individuals",

which I welcome. However, is that aspiration compatible with his Department's proposal to close the Christchurch Jobcentre Plus office? The Secretary of State might know that a petition signed by between 4,000 and 5,000 Christchurch citizens has been presented to the House. Will he receive a deputation led by me from the local authority and people of Christchurch in order to try to establish some sort of partnership and to achieve the objectives set out in the Green Paper, instead of closing its Jobcentre Plus office?

Mr. Hain: The Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform will be happy to receive a delegation seeking to take forward the hon. Gentleman's campaign. I understand his position. I have received representations from many hon. Friends on such local issues, and they are difficult to solve. We have been trying to take resources from back office Jobcentre Plus functions to ensure that we get the maximum resources to the front line. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, personalised support is essential if we are to meet the challenge of getting people, many of whom have been on long-term benefits, into the world of work—if they are able to enter it.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement and the Green Paper, and he is right to remind Members that we have the highest employment in our history. We certainly should support the free movement of labour throughout the enlarged European Union and the great migration of workers from central and eastern Europe to this country, as it helps us achieve faster economic growth. Is he aware, however, of there being any evidence that that will make it harder to drive down unemployment among certain social groups in our society? Will he also tell us whether some of our major banks and insurance companies are among the major employers who have agreed to interview people who have been unemployed for a long time?

Mr. Hain: We are embarking on a more radical approach to employment generation and enabling people to move into work—I am glad that my right hon. Friend welcomes that—for the very reasons that he gives. I know that he has been concerned about the issue, and the local employer partnerships will be concentrated on getting long-term benefit claimants into work. The focus is not those people who come out of a job, go on to benefits for a short time and then go back into work, but those who have been out of work for a long time. That is one reason why we will require lone parents to seek work once their child reaches the age of seven: the longer lone parents are out of work, the more difficult it is to create the environment in which they can return to work. We will work closely with everybody and I welcome any views that my right hon. Friend wishes to express.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I also welcome the Government's attempt to tackle the hard edge of the unemployment problem. It appears that two approaches will be adopted. The first is the emphasis on the private sector in providing skills, guaranteeing interviews and, indeed, guaranteeing 250,000 jobs. Is the Secretary of State assured that the private sector has the capacity to do that, and that the capacity is located at the hard edge and in the same places as the bulk of those affected? Secondly, given the public commitment to a flexible new deal approach and the wrap-around care provision, what public resources will be devoted to that?

The Secretary of State will know that Northern Ireland is one of the areas with a big problem with long-term unemployment. What plans does he have for discussions with the Minister for Social Development and the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that some of these ideas are passed on?

Mr. Hain: We would be happy to discuss those matters. When I was responsible for the area, I was well aware of the points that he raises, although—as the hon. Gentleman will know—Northern Ireland now has more jobs and lower levels of unemployment than ever before, and is well on the way to being where it should be as a successfully performing area. I would be happy to work with the Ministers he mentions.

The hon. Gentleman asked about capacity in the private sector. When my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform and my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Prime Minister met large employers at No. 10 this morning, it was noticeable that they were keen to engage. Many, if not all, of them are already engaged, but they are keen to reach out because they have a large number of vacancies. They include—I do not know the detail, but I know that they are keen to help in Northern Ireland as well—Marks and Spencer, Tesco and Sainsbury, which all see huge opportunities.

As for flexible child care and other support mechanisms, it will be for the devolved Executive to deliver, but we want to work closely with them and co-operate in whatever way we can.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I welcome the new personalised service that my right hon. Friend has mentioned and his reassurances that the system developed out of the Green Paper will be applied sensitively and flexibly. Will he therefore consider the special circumstances of lone parents with a child or children with disability? As their children get older, the accessibility of child care and other support mechanisms is much worse. Indeed, as those children move into adulthood, even lone parents who have been in work find that they can no longer work because the support services simply are not available. Will my right hon. Friend consider their special needs?

Mr. Hain: I will happily do so, and I am keen to work with my hon. Friend, who heads the every disabled child matters group. I hope that she will give us the benefit of her ideas. The system will be geared to individual needs and will be very personalised. We must recognise that for everyone family life is just as important as working life. This is not about focusing on getting a job, but about the idea that getting a job will help to strengthen family life. That will need to be individually tailored and individual needs will be taken into account. The proposals are about choice and independence. For most lone parents, the opportunity of a decently paid job is a liberating experience, because the state is then no longer responsible for them. They are responsible for themselves and have the dignity and opportunity to offer support to their children that come with that.

Mr. Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute) (LD): The Secretary of State talked earlier about getting more staff to the front line, and I agree with the need to do so. However, in my constituency, his Department is making two members of staff compulsorily redundant in the small job centre in Campbeltown, and three more jobs are threatened, which would almost halve the number of staff. Does he not realise that local staff possess local knowledge, which is important when giving advice and support to local people? Instead of centralising the service in big call centres such as Clydebank, the Government should keep the work locally. Will the Secretary of State alter the policy of shifting jobs from small towns such as Campbeltown to big call centres such as Clydebank?

Mr. Hain: There is a distinction between call centre work and front line delivery in Jobcentre Plus offices. As I said earlier, we have tried to get more resources to the front line, where staff with local knowledge are very important. That will remain a key part of what we are trying to do.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): What functions currently provided by Jobcentre Plus will move to the private and third sectors? How will the commissioning work, and will the contracts be published?

Mr. Hain: I was able to provide some reassurance on those points to Mark Serwotka, the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, when I talked to him about our plans. There will be more intensive work for Jobcentre Plus staff in the first 12 months. It is in the nature of the shift from being on passive benefits such as income support or incapacity benefit to being on active, work-based benefit that more activity by Jobcentre Plus staff will be needed. After 12 months, depending on how the provision is delivered—by the public sector, the private sector, including Jobcentre Plus in principle, or the voluntary sector—there will be an impact. However, I expect that it will balance out in terms of staff. We will have to work out the contracts, but we want to ensure that they are results-based and sustainable.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was delighted recently to be able to show Lord McKenzie the partnership work between the retail sector and the further education sector in my constituency, and the impact that that has had on employment. I commend that work to my right hon. Friend. Will he ensure that he gets his own Department in order and that family-friendly policies prevail within it?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend had better tell me exactly what he means by that. The Department should practise what it preaches and I think that we have a proud record of delivery in recent years. On the partnership between retail and further education, the latter has an important role to play, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills will identify shortly, especially in forging close links with local businesses. In my experience, the FE colleges that perform most successfully have an organic relationship with the local business community.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): While most of the Green Paper will be about getting people who are out of work into work, I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State say that there would be a focus on job retention, which is extremely important for those with mental health problems. We make it doubly difficult for them because they get help only when falling out of their existing job, and finding a new job causes extra stress and anxiety. What is his thinking on how we can improve job retention, especially for people who have had mental health problems?

Mr. Hain: I welcome what my hon. Friend says, and she makes a very important point that illustrates the step change that we will need to make. New challenges will be faced by the extra layers of people to whom we want to offer the chance to work. Sainsbury is one of the companies with which we are working in partnership, and it has put in a lot of work, with Mencap, on employing people with mental health problems. It intends to pilot one of our local employment partnership programmes, through recruitment for online grocery jobs in London within the M25. Sainsbury's chief executive talked about that at No. 10 this morning, and the company's participation will help us to encourage employers to recognise that people who claim incapacity benefit because of stress or similar problems are able to work. They can be helped to overcome their problems if they are given the opportunity to work, but job retention is important, and they must be given support in that respect as well.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): I welcome many elements of the statement and the Green Paper, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend will accept that many hon. Members in the Chamber today share my difficulty with the idea of a lone parent of a 12-year-old child being taken off income support. Many parents will welcome the opportunity to work, but the problem has less to do with seeking jobs or the stigma associated with not having a job, than with the fact that there is a lack of wraparound child care that is affordable and of high quality. That is especially awkward in the summer months when the schools are on holiday, as child care that is normally needed only before or after school has to be available all day. People who work in supermarkets suffer most of all, as the flexible hours that they work mean that they often finish at 8 or 10 o'clock in the evening, and it cannot be expected that those hours will all be worked only by people who do not have children.

Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the first box to be ticked in the personalised care catalogue will be the availability of high-quality, affordable and wraparound care? The second box to be ticked can then be a person's suitability for work.

Mr. Hain: I shall welcome my hon. Friend's detailed comments on the Green Paper, but it makes clear that the availability of suitable child care is an essential component. We cannot expect lone parents who have to care for children to take a job unless that care is available. Such care will be increasingly available over the next few years, and should be universally available when we come to consider bringing the age of the child down to seven. We would not expect parents with children aged seven to accept a job unless it was certain that the proper child care was available locally, and that they had access to the support that they need. That support must be affordable, as people in that situation cannot always get jobs that are well paid, although we hope that they will be able to do so in the future. If parents do not get affordable support, we will not be able to give them the opportunities that they want.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol, East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are serious about tackling child poverty, we should look not only at the quantity of people whom we move from welfare into work, but also at the quality of the jobs that they go to? If we force people to take unskilled, insecure and low-paid jobs, we will tend to entrench families in poverty. In contrast, we should give people with slightly older children a breathing space so that they can go into full-time education without adversely affecting their benefits. In the longer term, that will be a much more sustainable and sensible solution.

Mr. Hain: I know of my hon. Friend's work with the Child Poverty Action Group, and I welcome her expertise and commitment in responding to the Green Paper. She is right that the question is one of quality as well as quantity. There would be no point in making lone parents enter an insecure world of work, and no benefit would accrue if they were to find themselves in the twilight world of temporary and agency work, as that lacks the security that they need. People in that situation would not feel that they were offering themselves or their children any future, and we must make sure that the problem identified by my hon. Friend is resolved.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): I do not seek a referendum on this matter. The Government's record in this regard is generally excellent, but I hope that they will recognise that, as other hon. Members have noted, some stubbornly difficult areas of high unemployment remain. In my constituency, which covers Govan and Pollok, more jobs are about to be created than there are unemployed people, but the danger is that the jobs will be filled by people from more prosperous areas, or by migrants. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling for my area to be made a zero unemployment zone? Jobcentre Plus staff should be tasked with working to that end, so that the jobs are not filled with people from outside. Will he also co-operate with the Scottish Parliament and Glasgow city council to achieve zero unemployment in the parts of the city that I have mentioned? Thank you!

Mr. Hain: I thank my hon. Friend. We are very happy to work with Glasgow city council and other local authorities across the country. That is one reason why I have made that option available after 12 months, rather than simply sticking with job providers in the private or voluntary sectors. Many councils want to get involved, and they have the sort of ideas and expertise that will assist us in our aims. However, it is precisely to avoid the problem that my hon. Friend describes—of more jobs being available than there are people on the jobseeker's allowance claimant count—that we are getting local employers involved in the local employment partnerships. The priority of such employers is to employ local people, as they are more likely to be long-term rather than short-term employees. Turnover rates are often very high in the retail sector, for example, but they can be reduced if local people are involved, and especially the ones who are desperate to work but have previously not had the opportunity. Local employment partnerships provide a key answer to the important question posed by my hon. Friend.

World-Class Skills

1.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. John Denham): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement on delivering world-class skills in England. Natural resources, a big labour force and a dose of inspiration used to be all that was required for countries to succeed economically. Today, it is the skills of our people that matter most. We have achieved much since 1997, with 2.6 million more people in jobs, more than 1.7 million adults with literacy and numeracy qualifications and record numbers in our universities, but there is still huge challenge ahead.

At present, in the OECD, we are 18th for low skills, 20th for intermediate skills and 11th for high skills. To be competitive in a global economy, to reach 80 per cent. participation in employment and to offer new opportunities to people in work, we must do better.

Today, the Government are publishing the document "World Class Skills". It sets out how, with individuals and employers, we will bring about a skills revolution and close the gap between where we are now and where we need to be in 2020. Our ambition is to ensure that this country becomes a world leader in skills by 2020. That means being in the top quartile of OECD countries—the premier league for skills.

The targets that Lord Leitch recommended, and which we have accepted, are hugely ambitious. We want 95 per cent. of adults to achieve functional literacy and numeracy by 2020, and our aim is to have more than 1.1 million more people achieving that over the next three years. We also want more than 90 per cent. of adults to be qualified to at least level 2 by 2020, with one and a half million more adults achieving a full level 2 for the first time over three years. Another objective is to shift the balance of intermediate skills from level 2 to level 3, with half a million more people reaching that standard over three years. We want to have more than 40 per cent. of adults qualified to level 4 and above by 2020, with 1.25 million more by the end of the comprehensive spending review period.

Enhancing all our skills so much, so rapidly, will take more than the effective use of public and private money, more than changes in the way in which we organise and deliver training, and more than our overhaul of qualifications so that all employers rate them and individuals feel they are worth striving for. It will take a culture change in attitudes towards training and skills. The result will be that in the years to come, when somebody complains that they are in a dead-end job, their best friend will ask what they are doing to improve their skills. Alternatively, when employers express frustration at the skills of their employees, others will ask what they are doing to train them.

As individuals and employers accept greater responsibility for improving their skills, they must know that we in Government accept our responsibility to support them. "World Class Skills" sets out how we will meet our responsibility. We must ensure that the rising generation starts working life with higher qualifications and higher skills. We will introduce legislation to raise the participation age to 18. We will boost the number of apprentices in England, meaning that all suitably qualified young people will have access to an apprenticeship, and we will introduce a new entitlement to free training for those aged 19 to 25, in order to help more people in that target group achieve their first full level 3 qualification.

Seventy per cent. of the work force of 2020 have already left compulsory-age education. That is why the focus of "World Class Skills" is on adults. Our proposals are based on clear principles. First, we must ensure that employers are at the heart of the skills system. Improved skills improve productivity and competitiveness, but training must be tailored to employers' needs, delivered in ways that support their businesses, and offer qualifications in which they have confidence.

The creation of a demand-led system of skills is our single most fundamental reform. We will make "train to gain" a much broader service that will help employers of all sizes and in all sectors to improve the skills of all their employees. We will put employers at the head of the skills system. Working with the devolved Administrations, we will create a new UK commission for employment and skills, and strengthen the employer voice at the heart of the system. We will reform the remit of sector skills councils to make them more sharply focused on raising employer ambition and investment in skills at all levels. Employers will have the key role in reforming vocational qualifications to ensure that they generate economically valuable skills. It will be easier for employers' in-house training programmes to be accredited. More higher education institutions will collaborate with employers to develop programmes and delivery methods that meet their higher-level skills needs.

Secondly, individuals must also get training that is tailored to their needs. New skills accounts will give individuals greater ownership and choice over their learning, motivating them to gain skills and achieve qualifications, enter work and progress in employment. Moving from a poor job with few prospects to a better job can be as hard as moving from unemployment into work for the first time, so we will back skills accounts with a new universal adult careers service in England. Working in partnership with Jobcentre Plus, the careers service will be able to advise on training and skills, and help overcome other barriers to ambition, such as sorting out child care. We will legislate to give adults a new legal right to access free basic literacy and numeracy programmes and training, leading to their first full level 2 qualification.

Thirdly, we will work in partnership with employers and employees. We will step up the drive to encourage employers, large and small, to sign the skills pledge to benefit their staff. Companies that sign the skills pledge make a public commitment to support their employees to become more skilled and better qualified. We will support them through "train to gain". We recognise that the encouragement of a colleague may often be the single most influential factor in persuading someone to improve their skills. So we will encourage trade unions in the important part they have to play in achieving our skills ambitions, through union learning representatives—currently 18,000 strong—and by building on the achievements of the new union-sponsored training programme, unionlearn.

This partnership approach, in which we shall engage learners and employers, is crucial to the new culture we are seeking to create. Without it the nation will not

meet the targets we are setting out. Failure is not an option. That is why Lord Leitch proposed that in 2010, the new commission for employment and skills should review whether we are making satisfactory progress or whether we need to introduce a statutory workplace training entitlement. I can confirm today that we will carry out such a review in 2010. However, let us make every effort to achieve our ambitions without legislation.

Our proposals benefit employers and employees alike. The business case for investing in skills stands in its own right. It makes sense for Government to work with employers purely for the economic benefits and improved competitiveness it will bring. However, we must not forget that for many people, improved skills are the route to better jobs, higher incomes, reduced child poverty and improved social mobility. If we enable parents on low incomes to raise their aspirations and to have the opportunity to improve their lives, we can be sure that their children will have higher aspirations and better opportunities too.

Lord Leitch challenged us all to raise the nation's skills base, build productivity, increase social inclusion and improve economic competitiveness. With employers, employees and other learners, unions, colleges, universities and training providers, we will meet that challenge. As our new skills campaign on television and in the press so rightly says: "Our Future. It's in Our Hands". I commend the paper to the House.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Of course, we share the Government's aim of achieving world-class skills. We agree with the powerful statement by Lord Leitch in his report that

> "In the 21st century, our natural resource is our people—and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential."

However, the Government have been making big promises about skills for years. In Budget after Budget, the Prime Minister launched initiative after initiative—initiatives that are supposed to be rising to the skills challenge. In his 1999 Budget statement, he said:

> "Britain must make a quantum leap in skills".—[*Official Report*, 9 March 1999; Vol. 327, c. 176.]

In fact, even before Labour came to office, in 1996, he said:

> "I want Britain to be a world skills superpower".

Today we are told that our aim is to be in the top quartile of OECD countries—I guess that is what 10 years in government does to people.

Perhaps one reason for that downgrading of ambition is the uncomfortable evidence that some key problems have been getting worse. The number of 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training has risen from 1.08 million in 1997 to 1.25 million today. That is a 15 per cent. increase. The statement should have recognised that we need a change from the failed approach of the past. Both Lord Leitch's report and the Secretary of State use the right language. They talk about a demand-led system; we completely agree. They talk about its being employer-driven; again, we completely agree. However, in order to deliver that type of system, we need a tough-minded and rigorous assessment of how our skills policies need to change, which is not, I am afraid, what we have had today.

The report and the Government talk about a flexible employer-driven system, but the Government are keeping the panoply of controls that we have in our current centrally planned system. They will still set their plans for specific qualifications region by region, level by level and subject by subject, and further education colleges will still have to comply, churning out the paper qualifications that the Government want them to produce—when too many of those paper qualifications are not valued by employers, who understand that, sadly, a qualification is not always the same thing as a skill.

FE colleges, about which we have heard very little from the Secretary of State, are desperate to have more freedom to respond to local needs so that they can be employer-driven, but instead they have 17 different regulatory bodies telling them what to do. As we heard in the Foster report only last year:

> "There is a galaxy of oversight, inspection and accreditation bodies. They need to be rationalised, co-ordinated and focused."

That is what the FE colleges are calling out for. Instead of tackling the 17 bodies that already supervise FE colleges, the Secretary of State has just announced the creation of an 18th—the new UK commission for employment and skills.

Sitting on top of that structure is the Learning and Skills Council. I think that if Lord Leitch had been given his head, he would have wished to get rid of the Learning and Skills Council. Instead, the Secretary of State has announced today a fifth reorganisation—reforming the remit of sector skills councils. What are the Government really going to do about the Learning and Skills Council? After the latest reorganisation in Whitehall, will the Secretary of State tell us what he expects its long-term role and function to be?

If the Secretary of State had stood at the Dispatch Box and said that central planning had not worked, and that he was genuinely shifting to a demand-led, employer-driven system, we could have supported him, but sadly his statement today does not rise to that challenge.

Let me ask the Secretary of State about specific aspects of his statement. He set out several numerical targets—"ambitious" targets, he called them—that arose from Leitch, but it is noticeable that he did not give a target for apprenticeships, despite the fact that the then Chancellor said, as recently as in the 2007 Budget, that

> "There will be average rises of...cash each year for the next three years, enabling us to...do more to double apprenticeship numbers to 500,000".—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 828.]

In his December 2007 pre-Budget report, he again talked about apprenticeships rising to 500,000. Has the Secretary of State dropped the target, either because he no longer believes in such central targets for apprenticeships, or because he is afraid that he will not reach it? After all, the number of apprenticeships has fallen from 135,000 to 123,000 in the past 18 months. If he is committed to the target, why did he not refer to it in his statement?

The Secretary of State referred to focusing on adults—rightly so, because many of the people whose skills we need to raise are already in the work force. However, we really need to know what the Government are doing about the catastrophic fall in the number of FE adult

[Mr. David Willetts]

learning places, which is down by 1 million. We cannot talk about the importance of adult retraining and reskilling when the Government's mechanism for financing FE colleges shifts those colleges away from helping adults. He also talked about making "train to gain" a broad service, but is he aware that a criticism made of "train to gain" is that it has a very high dead-weight cost? A lot of that cost goes on programmes and training that would have happened anyway.

I am sure that, like me, the Secretary of State enjoys reading Institute for Fiscal Studies appraisals of his policies, and I am sure that he will recognise its statement that there is no "systematic evidence" that the programme had

"significantly increased employer provision of, or employee engagement in, training".

The appraisal estimated that about 85 to 90 per cent. of "train to gain" costs could be dead-weight. It went on to say that it could be that

"the true effect is zero percentage points implying 100 per cent. deadweight."

Why are the Government putting more money into "train to gain" when evaluations show that it has such a high dead-weight cost? Of course, the former Secretary of State for Education and Skills responded to that challenge by saying:

"the idea behind Train to Gain is to assist small businesses, which is where a particular problem lies".—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2007; Vol. 456, c. 975.]

It appears that the current Secretary of State has changed that approach; "train to gain" is no longer to be targeted on smaller businesses, in an attempt to respond to the problem of dead-weight cost. Why does he believe that his new general approach will improve the situation in any way?

We welcome the Secretary of State's comments on the new skills account. It could be significant, and it could give individuals much greater control over their training. We look forward to seeing the detail of that proposal, and we hope that lessons have been learned from the failure of individual learning accounts. However, I have to say that the statement does not rise to the challenge of providing an employer-driven, individually focused service to improve the nation's skills. It does not rise to the challenge of his new Department.

Mr. Denham: Obviously, to some extent I am slightly disappointed by the tone that the hon. Gentleman has adopted, but it is important to explore the claims that he makes so that we can see whether his response deserves to be treated as having any credibility. He attacked the Government for their failure to make progress on skills over the past 10 years—but as I said in my statement, the reality is that there has been considerable progress since we inherited a disastrous situation from the Conservative Government.

It is a bit rich to hear questions being asked about apprenticeships, because in the early 1990s, the reality was that one could go from one end of the country to the other and barely find a young person who was entering an apprenticeship, because the entire system had collapsed. We had to rebuild the apprenticeship system, not just in terms of the number of people involved, but in terms of the success rates and completion rates, which have gone up dramatically over the past two or three years. We have brought 1.14 million adults up to level 2 in the past four years. We have taken 1.75 million people through the skills for life programme. There were 250,000 people on apprenticeships in England last year, compared with only 75,000 in 1997—and those 75,000 had only just begun. We have every reason to be proud of what we have achieved from a very difficult starting point, but we have the honesty to set before the House the scale of the challenge that faces us in the years ahead.

As for whether what we have said matches up to what is needed, we accept some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised about FE colleges, but he will know that work is under way to design and introduce a lighter-touch regulatory system for them, and I hope that we can make more progress on that in the months to come. He criticised us first for expanding "train to gain", and secondly for failing to introduce a demand-led system that responds to the needs of employers. If he does not like "train to gain", he will at some point have to tell us what a demand-led system shaped by the interests of employers would actually look like. "Train to gain" is designed to make sure that the money in the skills system is used to ensure that FE colleges and other providers offer the training provision that employers actually want and recognise, and qualifications that employers value.

The hon. Gentleman was somewhat dismissive of what we said about taking a look at vocational qualifications, but to me that issue is central. There are employers who say that they are not sure that level 2 qualifications give them what they want, so our plans to work with the commission for employment and skills to overhaul the sector skills councils are central if we are to have a skills system that delivers what employers want.

The issue of dead-weight, particularly in the employment training pilots, has been raised. We will bring forward more detailed plans to extend "train to gain" in the autumn, and we will then need to set out how we intend to keep an eye on the issue. Of course, we do not in any way want to lose the quality of service offered to smaller employers, which they rate very highly, but it is right that the same responsiveness should be offered to a wider range of employers. I hope that I have covered the fundamental points raised by the hon. Gentleman. Incidentally, I should say to him that the target of 500,000 apprenticeships is set out prominently in the document. That is a UK target, and my commitment today is on meeting England's share of that overall target, but in no sense has the UK target disappeared from our ambitions and aspirations.

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): First, may I explain that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather), who would have responded to the statement, is unavoidably detained elsewhere by a family illness?

I guess that the Secretary of State spent the last two weeks immersing himself in the details of the Leitch report, because much of his statement is simply a rehash of the many targets in that report, and a repetition of many old announcements made by previous Ministers. However, the one issue not addressed in the statement is

whether there is a meaningful future for the Learning and Skills Council. Nine initiatives are mentioned in the statement, but time only permits me to comment on a few of them.

The main legislation that will follow from the statement will have to do with increasing the education and training participation age to 18. The draft legislative programme, published by the Prime Minister a couple of weeks ago, referred to compulsion for individuals, a duty for parents, enforcement, penalties and sanctions. Is that the right language to use when encouraging more young people to take part in education and training? Would it not be much better to talk about giving them meaningful entitlements and incentives?

There are voluntary pledges for employers until 2010, but we are talking about enforcement against individuals and their parents.

No assessment has been given of the cost of implementing the increase in educational participation or how that cost is to be shared by the state, the individual and crucially employers. Will the Secretary of State please address that?

A second tangible announcement in the statement is old news. It is about increasing the free entitlement from 19 to 25 to level 3 provision. That pledge was made at least twice by the Prime Minister when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, but we still do not know whether there is any new money to back it up. In his first statement in his new role, the Secretary of State announced £400 million of additional support for students in higher education. What additional support are the Government pledging for level 3 provision?

The statement is full of warm or tepid phrases about how the Government intend to implement the Leitch report. It refers to refocusing the efforts of sector skills councils, and more universities collaborating with employers. What on earth does that mean? I know that the Secretary of State is probably still getting to grips with what universities do, but I know that most universities, if not all, already have extensive collaboration programmes with employers. That is the basis of foundation degrees, and many employers and universities collaborate on cutting-edge degrees, such as in gaming technology, in which Britain leads the world. What more do the Government expect higher education to do?

On the voluntary skills pledge to which employers are meant to sign up by 2010, the statement speaks of stepping up the drive. Again, what on earth does that mean? We know that the former Chancellor appointed his new comrade, Lord Digby Jones, as the skills champion who will charge around the country exhorting employers to sign up to the pledge. Now that he has another role, will the Government please explain to us who will be exhorting employers to sign up to the pledge and how, over the next two and a half years up to 2010, they will assess whether employers have met that pledge in sufficient numbers and to a meaningful extent before they can decide whether legislation is needed?

The Liberal Democrats welcome the announcement of a universal adult careers service, but where is the money to back that up? The statement is silent on whether new resources will be put behind the service, or whether it will be a re-aggregation of existing budgets. Will the Secretary of State recognise that many people start on their career paths before they become adults, when they are 14 or 16? Does he agree that he needs to co-operate with his ministerial colleague in the Department for Children, Schools and Families to set up an independent careers and guidance service for 14-year-olds and 16-year-olds to complement the work being done with adults?

The right hon. Gentleman set out an ambitious agenda for his new Department, but there are three strands to the Department. Higher education and science are backed by billions of pounds of Government resources, but there is a risk and a perception out there that the adult skills element of the Department is the Cinderella. He will have to work hard to redress that perception. The most compelling change that needs to take place is more engagement and more investment by employers. Unless the Government are willing to back up the statement with action rather than exhortation, the ambitious target of being in the premier league by 2010 will be very hard to achieve.

Mr. Denham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, which are all pertinent. I shall try to address them all. Of course I understand why the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather) is not able to be present today.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Learning and Skills Council, so I shall take the opportunity to set out the position. As he knows, the funding for school sixth forms, sixth-form colleges and the contribution of FE colleges to 14-to-19 provision will transfer from the LSC to local authority ring-fenced budgets. My estimate is that we will not be able to give effect to the full legislative changes until the academic year 2010-11, so the legal responsibility will remain with the LSC over that period. We will co-operate sensibly and closely with the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families to make sure that provision is delivered effectively both for young people in that age group and for adult learners.

For post-19 education and training, we will consider how best to deliver the functions and services that support the FE system, and I want to build on the progress made with the LSC over recent years in developing a demand-led approach. As we do that, we will work closely with the LSC and other national partners, and consult schools, colleges and providers to ensure that the new arrangements are introduced smoothly. We will take the opportunity to review how the funding and accountability framework can best support initiative and high performance at institutional level and across the FE sector as a whole.

On participation to 18, the set of principles are similar to those that I discussed in my statement. We would rather not use compulsion, but we cannot rule it out if sufficient progress is not made. That must be the approach to young people in education and training. The detailed allocation of costs will depend to some extent on the balance between employer-based and work-based training.

On 19-to-25 provision, I make no apologies for the fact that the Government have set out repeatedly their vision of being able to offer an apprenticeship to anybody in the 16-to-19 age group who wants to go on

[Mr. Denham]

an apprenticeship, and a commitment to level 3 up to age 25. It has taken time to build up capacity in the apprenticeship system from where we started to bring that goal more and more within reach, and we continue to make progress. I do not regard it as a rehashed promise, but rather as one towards which we are steadily making progress.

With respect to universities, HEFCE has developed a package with universities for about 5,000 co-funded higher level placements with industry for the coming period. That is a step in the right direction, but the bigger issue that the hon. Gentleman might like to consider is that, of the entire training budget held by employers, only 3 per cent. is spent with higher education institutions. That suggests that there is a massive potential to increase the volume of higher level education and training involving universities from the present level. That is something that we need to discuss in the years to come.

On the skills pledge, we will step up the drive to get companies to join the skills pledge. The noble Lord Jones, who is now a Government Minister, brought a particular and individual verve and passion to the skills pledge, and he slotted into the post very naturally indeed. I have already met Sir Michael Rake, who will chair the commission on employment and skills, to discuss how we continue and whether it would be appropriate to look for a single envoy or whether the commission as a body, which will have strong employer representation, may be a better vehicle to take the pledge forward. I hope we can resolve that quickly.

The starting point for resources for the adult careers service is to bring together learndirect and nextstep. It makes sense to co-ordinate those services and to stress the importance of the close working relationship with Jobcentre Plus. On the starting point at 14, the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the diploma programme.

Finally, I do not believe that adult skills is a Cinderella. What Leitch has given us for the first time is a logical framework to approach funding, with the public sector recognising a responsibility particularly in the area of basic skills and level 2 qualifications, and a recognition that higher level qualifications should rightly attract a larger contribution from individuals and employers because the direct and immediate benefits to them are that much greater. That gives us a sensible framework for deciding how we want to fund this crucial area of work.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his place, and I warmly welcome the statement. The fact that one of his first speaking appointments was to the all-party skills group and the National Skills Forum augurs well for the emphasis and focus that the Government are putting on skills. I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments on culture change and the focus on adults. I should like to raise two issues with him which have informed the discussions that the all-party group have had about Leitch since the report was published at the end of last year.

The first is about focusing on adult learners. My right hon. Friend will know all the statistics about the demographic gap that we are going to face over the next 10 to 15 years in terms of younger people, which means that we must place even more emphasis on older people in the work force. Does he agree that reskilling is as important as upskilling as part of the central strategy to gain more effectiveness in this area?

My second point is a related one. One of the criticisms of this policy that has been made in the past is that it has not always been finessed enough, particularly in relation to older learners. In considering how we take forward the exacting targets that Leitch has set, can we focus more on age-proofing and the particular needs of people in their 40s and 50s, and even beyond? We need to get those issues right in order to maximise the contribution to the skills improvements and ambitious targets that my right hon. Friend and his Department rightly look to.

Mr. Denham: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments and acknowledge the important work done by the all-party group on skills, not least in bringing the world skills competition to the UK in a few years' time. Reskilling is enormously important. One of the challenges is to get the relationship between FE colleges and other training providers and employers right so that it is simple for employers to identify the package of training, and the delivery method, that will meet their needs. It may well be that the person is already in work and we have to raise their level of skills without disrupting the way in which the company or employer operates. "Train to gain" and the brokerage service will be as available to people facing that problem as to those who are, say, trying to meet the skills pledge to get people into level 2. That is an important part of its role.

I am interested in my hon. Friend's point about age-proofing. I see no reason why the policies that I set out should not be of equal benefit to people of all ages in the work force, but if there are particular issues that he would like to raise with me, I would be more than happy to meet him, and perhaps other members of the all-party group.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. May I remind all hon. Members of the need for just one question and a short response so that more may be successful in catching my eye?

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's statement. For the whole of my working life, we have had education for the best and skills for the rest. Leitch has put skills right at the heart of the national agenda, not just the Government's agenda. In terms of the 40 per cent. target for level 4 students, or graduates, by 2020, does the Secretary of State recognise that simply adding more graduates to our work force is not what UK plc really wants? There is a massive need for scientific and technical skills, particularly at level 4. What plans does he have to address the market so that we can produce graduates with the relevant skills for business rather than simply more graduates to meet a target?

Mr. Denham: There are two issues that we need to address. First, there is the way in which a range of higher education institutions sets out to deliver the

types of degree course that the hon. Gentleman is talking about; foundation degrees are often particularly relevant in this area. Secondly, not every higher level qualification is a degree qualification, although it may involve that level of study. Many companies are working with higher education institutions on training programmes and delivering higher level education tailored to the needs of those companies. Some universities have made much better progress at organising themselves to know what is needed in the local economy at the higher level of skills. I agree that we should not be trapped by a particular model of what a degree should look like or by what a particular programme of study should look like. That will ensure that industry gets the skills that it needs.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the emphasis on mentoring in the trade union movement. However, it is not needed in the trade union movement alone. In some communities, particularly the most deprived, there is a deep-seated aversion to education and skills, and sometimes even to employment. May I draw to his attention an organisation called Skills Link, which operates in Tipton in my constituency and which uses community mentors to involve people in the education and learning process? Will he look at that with a view to seeing what lessons could be learned in raising skills in the most deprived areas?

Mr. Denham: I would be very interested to discuss the work that my hon. Friend describes. I met representatives from the TUC a few days ago and had a discussion with them about whether the expertise of 18,000 union learning representatives could be used in community, as well as workplace, settings. The statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that preceded mine helped to set out how both our Departments need to work together in communities of the sort that my hon. Friend mentions. We do not want a situation where we get somebody into work and then they drop out again and have to reapply three months later. Providing people with skills as they go into work, and maintaining and improving their skills levels in work, is absolutely vital to sustainable employment and a sustainable cut in unemployment in those communities. We need to use the skills of everybody we can find, not only public sector employees, to enable that to happen.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton) (Con): Any statement on improving skills is welcome. However, I should like to concentrate on the high skills area, where we are 11th in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in terms of quality. Those are the skills that really attract and retain investment in the knowledge-based creative industries. Can the Secretary of State assure me that he will take that into account in reforming the remit of the sector skills councils, which can be very responsive to what the industry needs if they work creatively with it? They are often criticised on the basis that they are still not multi-disciplinary enough to meet the new challenges that arise in some of the new creative, added value industries, where they cross sectors rather than just lying within one sector.

Mr. Denham: Within that brief question were several very important points. It is important that the sector skills councils engage effectively with the higher level skills. One of the things that Lord Leitch told us, very politely, was that some do it better than others. Some have engaged enormously well with higher education institutions because that is where their employers have said that the problem lies. We need to ensure that all sector skills councils do that as appropriate to their industries. Other initiatives, such as academies, are being developed; I think that there is going to be one for the nuclear industry. That is another way in which employers and providers can collaborate to meet the whole range of skills that are needed within a sector. *[Interruption.]* Of course, we must recognise the need for cross-sectoral courses to be available where appropriate, not just courses in individual sectors. And I am grateful to the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) for prompting me on that point from a sedentary position.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Is he aware that the Learning and Skills Council is causing mayhem among local training providers in areas like mine, with its constant chopping and changing of strategy and endless series of short-term contracts, now followed by a "big is beautiful" phase in which it is awarding contracts to large private sector providers who are very good at writing out the applications but walk away when they find, often predictably, that they cannot deliver? May I appeal to him to encourage the LSC to be a bit more consistent in its approach and to use local training providers where they are up to the job and capable?

Mr. Denham: I certainly hope that that is not the universal picture across the country. I will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about the particular issues that have given rise to his concern. We need to recognise that a move towards a more demand-led system of skills is a move away from the "predict and provide" approach based on saying, "We will work out how many places we want and give you a contract for them", to something that is much more closely tailored to what employers need. In that sense, over time there will in any case be quite a fundamental change to the relationship between the flow of funds and the providers of training, which should mean that we get a closer match between what is provided and what employers want.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome much of what the Secretary of State has laid before the House today. In his statement he said, "We will step up the drive to encourage employers, large and small, to sign the skills pledge to benefit their staff." Given that the Government are probably one of the largest employers in this country, particularly through Her Majesty's armed forces, I urge the Secretary of State to meet the Defence Secretary to discuss the number of armed forces personnel who, because of overstretch, are unable to attend reskilling, upskilling and continuing professional development courses as a result of those courses being cancelled, or of there not being enough personnel to fill them.

Mr. Denham: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will see any Secretary of State whose Department is too tardy in signing up to the skills pledge. Most Departments are already signed up and we need to ensure that that extends to all reasonable parts of public service. The

[Mr. Denham]

armed forces have done a good job in many areas, particularly with regard to apprenticeships, but if the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise particular issues with me, I shall certainly look into them.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and it is clear that the Government are seriously addressing an important national problem. The problem is not new; some 20 years ago Sig Prais and Claus Moser drew attention to it, making stark comparisons between Britain and the continent of Europe concerning skills in particular, but also education and skills in the broader sense. Is it not possible that we are trying to invent our own solution to a problem when obvious solutions might be available abroad? Should we not just look at the most successful countries on the continent of Europe and start to imitate them directly in order to ensure that we achieve in the way that they do? Employers would not then simply employ continental Europeans who already have the skills necessary, while leaving our own people unemployed.

Mr. Denham: I believe that Lord Leitch looked at international experience as well as the approach taken in this country. It is true that the issue of skills has been a problem with the British economy for a long time—certainly since the latter part of the 19th century, at the very least—and it has been raised recently. Sir Claus Moser was heavily influential on the literacy campaign that was launched with such success four or five years ago.

My view is that for too long we have not identified properly the partnership between the Government, individuals and employers that can deliver successful and sustainable improvements in skills. Over the years, we have perhaps lurched between thinking that the public sector could work it all out for itself, and putting unrealistic expectations on the private sector to pay for everything. I believe that the statement I made today gets the balance right, and it should be the basis for real achievement in the future.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): Will the Secretary of State closely examine access to training in rural areas? In North Cornwall, despite excellent work by schools, we still have people making a 100-mile-a-day round trip from places like Bude to Truro in order to access specialist courses. Will he bear in mind the provision of training and upskilling in deprived rural areas such as North Cornwall?

Mr. Denham: That is an important issue. It is not simply a matter for urban areas, and I recognise the problems set out by the hon. Gentleman. There will be some funds in the system to assist in areas in cases of special need, which can include matters such as transport. I hope that as we flesh out the detail of our plans, he will see that we recognise the problems in areas such as his.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post. In doing so, I draw his attention to the work of primary schools in my constituency that have set up adult learning centres in the community. Parents in those schools have been able to add to qualifications, or gain them if they had none, leading to their gaining employment. We can really target and attack deprivation in the most deprived areas in our communities by using local centres such as primary schools. I commend that work to my right hon. Friend.

Our colleague, my hon. Friend the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, has visited a primary school in my constituency and seen for himself how the process is working. It works because it is in an environment where people feel confident and able to come forward and engage with what is going on, and by doing so they are able to assist in the education of their own children. Examples of that process were shown to my hon. Friend when he came to visit. We are able to target such communities, and I urge the Secretary of State, when he is considering future funding, to make it easier for schools to set up such adult learning centres.

Mr. Denham: I am delighted to hear what my hon. Friend said. I am passionate about the ability to tackle family poverty and improve social mobility through improving adult skills. In my constituency, one of the least expected but most welcome effects of Sure Start has been on the aspirations of parents who have been involved with it. Many of them, by becoming involved in Sure Start, have gone on to jobs as nursery nurses or classroom assistants, and then feed back that experience to their own children, affecting their expectations of what can be achieved. We need to extend the type of experience my hon. Friend talks about as widely as possible.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): One group of people who desperately need functional literacy and numeracy and skills training are offenders serving custodial sentences. How will the new universal adult careers service, the prison education service and the unions work together to ensure that every person leaving prison on the completion of a custodial sentence will be fit for work, and that employers are persuaded to overcome their very natural reluctance to offer a job to somebody who has been in prison?

Mr. Denham: That is a very important issue. The Government set out last year, in a document called "Next Steps", our response to some of the challenges of reducing reoffending, and we need to build on that work. In a previous capacity, I was enormously impressed by the work of the National Grid Transco scheme, which gets young offenders into work by essentially guaranteeing them jobs if they successfully complete training as they leave an institution. Through such mechanisms and the corporate alliance supported by the Ministry of Justice, I hope that, as well as generally raising the level of skills among offenders, we can extend the direct routes of offenders into work, because the reoffending rates involved are dramatically lower than those under many of the schemes we have tried in the past.

Orders of the Day

Statistics and Registration Service Bill

Lords Reasons for insisting on their amendments, considered.

Lords amendments Nos. 12, 13, 15, 20, 67 to 70 and 72.

2.28 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Angela Eagle): I beg to move,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments Nos. 12, 13, 15, 20, 67 to 70 and 72, does not insist on its Amendments 15B and 15C, but proposes the following amendments to the words restored to the Bill by disagreement with Lords Amendment No. 15: (a), (b) and (c).

We are dealing with pre-release, which is the final point of contention relating to the Bill. Since our last debate on the Floor of the House, the Prime Minister has announced that the Government will call for a vote to confirm the recommended candidate for the chair of the Statistics Board, before the measure goes to the Queen. That is in addition to our commitment to reduce further the length of time for which pre-release access is available to 24 hours for all UK-wide and reserved statistics. Hon. and right hon. Members will recall that the previous agreement was for 40.5 hours. By committing to reduce pre-release access from the current period of up to 5 days to what will now be a maximum of 24 hours, the Government are demonstrating that they have listened and responded to the views expressed during the debates on the Bill in both Houses. It is time that the Government were given credit for the moves and changes that have been made during the Bill's passage.

Under the proposals, it remains up to the Government to determine the precise content of the new pre-release arrangements under the new system, but our commitment today is to provide on the face of the Bill that the board must also be consulted. Moreover, pre-release arrangements will be set out in secondary legislation. The affirmative statutory instrument will set out rules and principles to restrict the number of people who receive pre-release access and the statistical series to which pre-release might apply. It will also restrict the length of time for which pre-release access is available to a maximum of 24 hours for reserve statistics.

2.30 pm

It has been more than 60 years since the previous statistical measure appeared before the House. We are concerned to ensure that the Bill leaves the House as "future-proofed" as possible in case it takes another 60 years to introduce another statistics Act. We want to ensure that the statistical community of the future operates under a system that is sufficiently flexible to remain relevant as needs change. The Government are therefore providing for pre-release arrangements to be contained in secondary rather than primary legislation. That is sensible, prudent and appropriate.

The processes will provide a powerful role for the board in determining the new arrangements. Under our proposals, the role will be confirmed in the Bill. It has never been the Government's intention, in including pre-release arrangements in secondary legislation rather than in the Bill or the code of practice, to give Ministers a free rein. The proposed arrangement would not lead to such an outcome. It ensures that pre-release arrangements are subject to public consultation, parliamentary scrutiny and open debate.

As I announced on 2 July, there will be a public consultation on the proposed content of the statutory instrument. Such consultation will be key to creating rules and principles for pre-release access that are credible, practical and appropriate in the context of the wider code.

As hon. Members know from previous debates, under clause 25, the board may at any time produce a report about any matter that relates to the exercise of its functions. If it does that, it must lay it before one or more Houses of Parliament and the devolved legislatures.

Since the board has functions under clause 8 to monitor pre-release access and will be consulted on the draft regulations, it may, if it wishes, prepare its response—or any concerns that it may have once the system is operational—as a formal report under clause 25. Even after a full consultation, the Bill provides that should it not be content with the outcome, or should it, in the fullness of time, wish further changes to the regime to be established in secondary legislation, it could not only call publicly for further changes, but do so in a formal report laid before the House. Clearly, were such a report prepared and laid before Parliament, we would expect Parliament—and the media—to question the Government on whether they would take up the independent board's recommendations, and to ask, "If not, why not?"

As I have stated previously, the Government are committed to reviewing the operation of the pre-release arrangements after 12 months. That is precisely the sort of event in which we expect the board to be closely involved—and precisely the sort of event that might trigger its members to write such a report under clause 25(3), if they wished to do that.

The Bill, together with the new legislative duty to consult the board in determining the content of the pre-release regime, will ensure a strong and meaningful role for the board in influencing the content of the pre-release regime and in enforcing the new arrangements.

When the content of the secondary legislation has been agreed, it will be laid before the House for approval by affirmative resolution. Once commenced, clause 11(3) provides that the board must treat the content of the secondary legislation as though it were part of the code of practice.

The Government intend that the board should play a full and meaningful role in determining the new pre-release arrangements and ensuring that they are complied with. There is substantial consensus on the importance and value of the Bill, which will govern the statistical system in this country. We have reached consensus on most of the key structures and processes that the Bill will establish. I hope that the hon. Members will support our proposals.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The purpose of the Bill, which the hon. Member for Wentworth (John Healey) spelled out on Second

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

Reading, is to restore confidence in the statistical base on which so many of our political decisions are made. That is much needed. When I was an Opposition health spokesman in the late 1990s, I remember patients being reclassified from one list to another, beds being reclassified as chairs, and, more recently, the former Chancellor's "revisions" of the start and finish dates of the economic cycle. Those and many other examples have contributed to undermining public confidence in the statistical data that are provided to us. The Bill is a welcome attempt to address that.

Conservative Members have long argued that an independent statistics service is a key part of the triple lock that will ensure fiscal and economic stability, along with the independent setting of interest rates and independent assessment of the fiscal rules. We have supported the principles of the Bill—after all, it enshrines much of our policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers) made it clear from the outset that we would engage constructively in trying to improve the measure. There have been some successes so far. We welcome Government concessions that have strengthened the Bill and made it more likely to achieve its objective. Much has therefore been achieved.

However, we need one last heave to make the Bill a substantial break with the past in relation to pre-release. The former national statistician identified that as the key matter for gaining public confidence. It is the last contentious issue, as the Exchequer Secretary said, and the subject of the Lords amendments that we are considering today.

As the Bill left this place on 2 July, it uniquely preserved to Ministers the power, through secondary legislation, to set the rules for pre-release—who gets what and when—but no other aspects of control of statistics. In other words, Ministers will control the parameters for the operation of the spin machine about any given release of data. That was justified on the curious ground that

"Ministers themselves are best placed to judge how much pre-release access they require, and under what conditions they require it".—[*Official Report*, 2 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 710.]

I bet they are. However, on that principle, Ministers may as well count the by-election votes tomorrow on the basis that they know best how many votes they require.

The earlier the access to statistics, the greater the scope of controlling the agenda. There is no other reason for wanting to retain such long pre-release periods and total control of the rules for pre-release.

Angela Eagle: Is the hon. Gentleman trying to persuade the House that all the arrangements that I have set out—board involvement, transparency, public consultation and an affirmative statutory instrument—amount to total control for Ministers?

Mr. Hammond: I am trying to persuade the House that it amounts to much less than independent control of the rules by the board, for which hon. Members in this place and the other place have argued. We perceive it as the objective for which we should hold out.

Ministers have acknowledged, in proposing to reduce the five-day maximum for non-market sensitive data to 40.5 hours, that we remain way out of line with other countries. In France, the time is one hour; in Australia, the time is three hours, and Canada allows data to be released to Ministers the evening before general release. We must tackle those remaining, glaring anomalies.

We are considering a proposal for an independent statistics system that allows Ministers to decide how much advance notice they get, how widely advance data are disseminated, and under what conditions. That is wildly out of line with international norms and very much out of line with what ordinary, thinking people would expect from a Prime Minister who promised to abandon spin.

Angela Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman at least acknowledge, so that we can have a debate in which we are in contact with the arguments, that we are not considering unconstrained ministerial decision making? The maximum time is 24 hours and there is a range of provisions about, for example, the number of people who can see pre-release statistics. We have made several changes, and we are now considering constrained ministerial decision making. The process is systematically set out, is transparent and will be contained in secondary legislation. Surely the hon. Gentleman will admit that.

Mr. Hammond: The Exchequer Secretary talks about 24 hours, but I do not see 24 hours in her proposal, which we shall come to in a moment. She must understand that there is a clear distinction between a decision by an independent board and a decision by Ministers after consultation with that board. If she does not understand that, why is the architecture of the rest of the Bill set out as it is, with the board having that degree of control?

If the Government do not get pre-release right, they will not restore public confidence in the system, regardless of whether the impartiality and the quality of the statistics will be improved by other initiatives in the Bill, and they will certainly not persuade the public that they have abandoned the spin culture. The issue has become the yardstick by which the success or failure of this attempt to clean up public data will be judged.

I freely admit to being something of a Johnny-come-lately to the Bill—

Angela Eagle: You are not the only one.

Mr. Hammond: Indeed, although the Exchequer Secretary did not come quite as late to the Bill as I did. I have had the pleasure of reading myself in, by looking at the debates in this place and the other place over the past six months or so. I have been struck by the irony that in a Bill that is designed to tackle the public perception of a culture of spin, it is the clauses most closely identified with that spin culture on which the Government have proved most resistant. It is doubly ironic that the debate itself has been mired in spin, first, when the Exchequer Secretary tried to convince the House that her voting for a report that argues for a three-hour maximum for pre-release is entirely consistent with standing at that Dispatch Box arguing for 40 hours for pre-release. Then there have been Ministers here and in the other place affecting not to understand the expectation that a clear statement by

the Prime Minister that there will be a 24-hour maximum on pre-release should mean just that, and not that the Government want to retain flexibility.

The intervention by the Prime Minister is an important element in this debate, but because it came on 3 July, it has not been debated in this House before. Was his constitutional statement on 3 July substantive or was it just spin? Was it a pre-emptive strike designed to head off demands for genuine independent control over pre-release? If his statement was substantive, why not write the 24-hour limit that he pledged into the Bill? He did not mention flexibility in his statement to the House and he did not say that the measure was subject to the small print. The commitment was simple—24 hours maximum. If we cannot take that at face value and incorporate it into the Bill, what credibility does the rest of that statement have?

Not 18 hours before the Prime Minister made that statement, the Exchequer Secretary was rather half-heartedly defending the 40.5-hour limit, saying:

"my duty at the Dispatch Box tonight is to say that the Government think that 40.5 hours is the appropriate time for pre-release, and that is what I will do."—[*Official Report*, 2 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 728.]

That was hardly a ringing personal endorsement, one might think. Some 18 hours later, the Prime Minister said:

"I propose that we reduce the advance sight that Government Departments have of the release of statistical information from as much as five days currently to just 24 hours."—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 817.]

That was straightforward, except that on 9 July Lord Davies of Oldham further clarified the situation in the other place, saying:

"We do not want to put the length of time for pre-release access in primary legislation as we want flexibility".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 July 2007; Vol. 693, c. 1237.]

Either there has been a serious communication problem at the heart of the Government or old-fashioned spin is alive and well.

The Exchequer Secretary cannot have known on 2 July what the Prime Minister was going to say on 3 July, because if she had, she would have been misleading the House with her statement, and she certainly would not have done any such thing. She then wrote to Committee members, also on 3 July, claiming that the Prime Minister's statement reflected the concerns expressed in the House the previous evening. So she would apparently have us believe that after the debate on 2 July she nipped round to No. 10 after the House rose, and that she and the Prime Minister decided on a 24-hour maximum over a cup of cocoa. I am not sure what worries me the most: the idea that there is no communication at the heart of the Government, the idea that they have retained their attachment to the culture of spin, or policy making on the hoof on such an epic scale.

2.45 pm

The Government of course claim that they have made a concession by requiring Ministers to consult the board before exercising the power to set the rules. However, the Exchequer Secretary must accept that the point of principle is that Ministers must not be judge and jury in their own cases, in relation to pre-release. The proper way to proceed now is for her to accept the Lords amendment—not scrapping pre-release, because that is not what is proposed, but allowing the board independently to determine the rules for pre-release, after consulting Ministers and taking into account their legitimate needs. The alternative way is for her to commit the Government to bringing in their own amendments to deliver a substantive role for the board in the pre-release process—I mean a substantive role, not merely a consultative role—if and when the Bill returns to the House of Lords after this debate.

While the Exchequer Secretary is at it, perhaps she will also commit herself to including the 24-hour absolute maximum limit on pre-release in the Bill—not because I suggest that, but because her own Prime Minister has said that. The principle behind the Bill must be that statistics should be allowed to speak for themselves, without the intermediation of politicians.

Angela Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way once more. He just used a phrase that is quite interesting. He talked about the legitimate interests of Ministers with respect to pre-release. Could he share with the House what he thinks they are?

Mr. Hammond: We recognise, and we have recognised throughout the debate, that Ministers have a legitimate interest in having access to data before they are made generally available.

Angela Eagle: Ah!

Mr. Hammond: We have never disputed that. The issue is who should be the arbiter of the period of advance notice, who should determine the rules under which data are pre-released and how extensive the dissemination of those data should be. The Exchequer Secretary can um and ah as much as she likes from the Government Front Bench, but she will know that what we do in this country is wildly out of line with what is done in other developed economies.

If that is not because the Government want to be able to manage the release of information in a way that would have been called spin in the old days, she needs to come forward with a substantive explanation of why the Government think that pre-release is qualitatively different from all the other aspects of control of statistics. The truth, as she very well knows, is that certain Departments—ironically, more so those concerned with social statistics than economic statistics—are determined to keep control over the release of what is all too often bad news, even when it is dressed up as good news, and to have access to at least one full news cycle ahead of release, in order to soften up the media and the public for the formal release and set the pristine objective data in a subjective context.

In conclusion, I can do no better than quote Lord Moser from the debate in the other place. He said:

"we now have a Bill that is extremely helpful and could historically lead to a new statistical system, except that it misses out on one particular. Unfortunately, that particular—pre-release—is probably the most known about in the statistical community and is in some ways indicative of the Government's ultimate attitude to the whole subject of public trust."

I concur with Lord Moser, as he continued:

"I still hope that it is not too late for the Government to think again on the only aspect that keeps this from being a really good Bill and makes it flawed".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 July 2007; Vol. 693, c. 1255.]

I hope indeed that it is not too late.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Unlike the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), and the Exchequer Secretary, I am not a new boy to the Bill. I have been with it at every stage and must have spoken at least half a dozen times on the issue of pre-release, so I do not need to rehearse all the arguments. Indeed, in any event, the hon. Gentleman made the points that I would have made about our continued reservations concerning how the Government have approached the issue.

The Minister asked for some acknowledgement of progress, and I am happy to acknowledge it in respect of the big picture of the Bill. It has been a good and useful Bill, which has been substantially improved in respect of official and national statistics, the locus of decision making in Departments and the role of the statistics board and chief statistician. Those are all big advances, helped by the fact that the other place has been engaged in improving the Bill.

The Minister also wanted acknowledgement of progress on the issue of pre-release. Again, progress has been made and she has played an important part in it, as did her predecessor. I acknowledge that 24 hours is less than 40 hours, so it amounts to an improvement, but it is still much more than in almost every other developed country. I acknowledge the Minister's recent innovation of allowing consultation with the board. Once again, that is a step forward, but I am sure that the Minister would acknowledge that consultation can mean anything or nothing. If approached in a constructive spirit, it provides the essence of how good governance should work, but if a bloody-minded Minister wishes to defy the Bill's principles, he will still be able to do so.

Accepting that the amendment will suffice therefore requires a great deal of trust. It is important to stress that the amendment from the other place acknowledges the important role of Ministers. Indeed, amendment No. 13 states that access should be kept

"to the minimum necessary to meet the needs of Ministers".

The concept of the needs of Ministers is already clearly accepted in that amendment.

The Minister places great stress on the fact that the statutory instrument will be subject to a full consultative process. I am sure that she means exactly what she says and I am sure that the consultation will be good, but she knows perfectly well that there is a fundamental defect with the statutory instrument process. If it comes before the House in a defective form and fails to reflect some of the key points of the consultation outside the House, it is unamendable. We simply will not have access at that stage to the iterative process that we have had on the main Bill. That is why we are resisting the idea of simply trusting in that process. I acknowledge that a great deal of progress has been made, even on that very vexed issue, but it is important to return the matter to the other place. If the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge is inclined to move against the Government's proposals, we will support the Conservatives in a Division.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): In common with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), I believe that we should support the Lords amendment. There are two main issues. One is the time period and the other is who should in the end decide.

On the time period, it is quite obvious from the changes of the past few months that the Government's proposal is completely arbitrary. There was no basis to 40.5 hours and there is no basis for 24 hours. There is no better illustration of how arbitrary the whole issue is than the position of the Minister. Last summer, when she signed the Treasury Committee's report, she was in favour of three hours. A couple of weeks ago, she told the House that she was in favour of 40 hours and spoke to proposals on that basis. Now she is put up to defend 24 hours. She is all over the place and the Government are all over the place. This is a completely arbitrary period being bandied around.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge has already said, the proposed period is wholly out of line with international practice. Even 24 hours is much longer than the period allowed by statistical services of other developed economies. That is why, when the Treasury Committee came to look into this matter, we looked hard at it and settled on a figure of three hours. A case can be made for four hours, six hours or whatever, but even 24 hours is far too long. More important than that, the figure is completely arbitrary. It is simply a guessing game.

Then there is the issue of who should actually decide. I certainly welcome the Government's proposal to seek parliamentary approval for what is decided. I welcome the 12-month review of how the arrangements work. I welcome the fact that there will be a degree of consultation before those arrangements are set in stone, but what is the point of consulting everyone when it has already been announced that the period will be reduced from 40 hours to 24 hours? What is there then to consult on? The Prime Minister has said that the Government changed their mind and that the maximum period will now be 24 hours. What is the point of beginning a process of consultation on something when an announcement about it has already been made?

The Minister has said from the Dispatch Box this afternoon that she wants a meaningful role for the board. Let me remind the House that we are setting up an independent statutory body to deal with statistics, to take them out of the hands of politicians and to put them on an independent footing. Now she tells us that on the key issue of pre-release—the privilege given to Ministers so that they can spin material in advance of the announcement of a particular statistical series—the board will not determine what happens and will not, in fact, be meaningfully involved.

Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman was once a Minister. Did he spin figures to which he had privileged access as a Minister?

Mr. Fallon: I was never senior enough a Minister to be entrusted with figures even to try to spin. What is interesting is that the Treasury Committee report was signed by no fewer than six former Ministers who were all quite content for the advance period to be reduced from more than 40 hours to just three. The issue is not simply the spinning of statistics, but the notice involved when Ministers know that a bad series is just about to

be published. It is perfectly possible—sadly, we have seen it from this Government—for Ministers to arrange other statistics and other news to be announced to cover that particular negative line of statistics on that particular day. As we well know, the Government are fully capable of burying bad news when they feel like it.

We need to take all that out of the hands of Ministers and have it determined by a statutory board. What is the point of setting up a statutory board if the one key political issue of pre-release is the one issue that the board is unable to decide on in the end? We should support the Lords amendment.

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): I disagree on what is the central issue of the Bill. For me, the central issue is the independence of the statistics board. That is not a new issue. I recall raising the concerns of the statisticians working in my constituency with the then Prime Minister in 1989. They were concerned about moving control of statistics from the Cabinet Office to the Treasury. They were right to be concerned about the independence of the figures and right to fear that they might be manipulated. Their argument then was that the Treasury had the greatest vested interest in manipulation of the figures. I received a letter from Margaret Thatcher, who was Prime Minister at the time, stating that it was terribly unworthy to make such a suggestion and reassuring me that the director, Jack Hibbert, had assured her that if there were any ministerial interference in the figures, he would resign.

I am afraid that we have now clearly reached a position—based partly on fact, but mostly on fable—of great cynicism about the objectivity of Government statistics. There is a conception of spin, and the Government to their great credit have introduced the Bill, which has been hailed as one of the most important of the whole Parliament and on a par with the decision to grant independence to the Bank of England in deciding interest rates. That is absolutely right.

I regret that we are in a position of disagreement over the question of pre-release. It is unfortunate that the Bill may well be marred as a result of it. The Government have been extremely generous in accepting many of the proposed amendments. Furthermore, the 1,300 of my constituents who work in the statistics office hail this Bill as a measure that will give new authority and new value to their work. There is doubt about the notion of spin, but it is exaggerated, and I am sure that the Government fully intend to have a period in which no excessive use of spin is made. The days of spin are gone. No Government in their right mind would use spin, because it is so counter-productive, but the Government must have some advance notice so that they can prepare their case.

I will support my party and Government if this matter is pressed to a vote. However, I say to the Minister that it will be regrettable if the Bill goes from this House with this apparent, but not indelible, stain on it. Otherwise, it could have gone forward with the unanimous support of the other place, the Treasury Committee and other experts in the field, including my constituents who are professional statisticians.

3 pm

Angela Eagle: The debate has resembled others on the matter, both those in which I have participated and those that took place before my appointment.

During the passage of the Bill, the Government have moved to meet the views of all sides. As a result, we have made real changes. I welcome the generous acknowledgement of that by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable). The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) also acknowledged that we have made considerable changes to the Bill during its passage.

We have amended clause 25, on the board's duty to produce and publish reports, to clarify that all reports must be laid before the devolved Parliaments. In clause 7, we have changed the board's objective, to underscore its role in promoting and safeguarding statistics that "serve the public good". In clause 10, we have changed the name of the code of practice, to emphasise its applicability to all statistics. We have granted the board a duty to comment on those statistics that it felt should be subject to the assessment process, which is an important aspect of this afternoon's debate, and we have clarified that when such statistics are produced by a Minister of the Crown, the Minister must state publicly when the board's request will be complied with; and if not, why not.

We have imposed a duty to comply with the code of practice. We have passed amendments to clarify the separation of functions between assessment and production of statistics, and to clarify the role, responsibilities and functions of the national statistician and executive office. We have passed the residual responsibilities for the board from the Treasury to the Cabinet Office. We have made a commitment, which will be enshrined in the Bill if the motion is passed, to consult the board on the content of the pre-release secondary legislation prior to its being laid before the House, and we have committed ourselves to consult publicly. We have announced that pre-release access will be tightened to 24 hours. We have made a commitment in principle to create a central publication hub through which all national statistics will be released in the new system, separating statistical releases from policy commentary. We have committed ourselves to review the pre-release arrangements after 12 months, including to assess whether they hinder the broader objective of increasing trust in statistics.

That is a good structure to give the newly independent statistics board, as it provides a firm foundation and basis on which to begin and continue its work. It should be recognised that the Government have been very responsive. We will not put the figure of 24 hours in the Bill, because the system may evolve further. It has been 60 years since we last had a piece of primary legislation on statistics. I would not want to put such a provision on the face of the Bill when it might take another 60 years before another piece of primary legislation is introduced, as that might get in the way of further progress. It is therefore only sensible, and justified by experience of primary and secondary legislation, to put the 24-hour figure in a statutory instrument, rather than in the Bill.

Mr. Hammond: What is being suggested is that the 24-hour maximum that the Prime Minister has proposed should be included in the Bill. The Minister is resisting

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

that on the ground that she needs flexibility for legislation to evolve. Is she seriously suggesting that it might evolve in the direction of the maximum pre-release time increasing?

Angela Eagle: Is the hon. Gentleman also seriously suggesting that when the Prime Minister makes a statement on the Floor of the House his word is not to be trusted?

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The hon. Lady should recognise that Prime Ministers come and go and, as she said, the legislation must last a long time. The promise made by the current Prime Minister does not necessarily bind the next Prime Minister. The House, however, can pass legislation that will put that promise into law. The flexibility is there, because the 24-hour figure would be only a maximum. If she is seriously suggesting that a longer period than 24 hours is necessary, and that is why she cannot put the figure in the Bill, she does not trust the Prime Minister's promise either.

Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman should listen more carefully to what I say. I made no suggestion that the Government were somehow intending to have a pre-release time that was longer than 24 hours. It is clear that 24 hours is a maximum.

I have set out the long list of changes that the Government have made to the Bill during its passage. It is an impressive and substantial list, and the Government should be given credit for their willingness to listen and for the changes that they have made. The time is now right for the Government to get their Bill, and for the other place to realise that they should allow the Bill to complete its passage without further changes.

All sides agrees that this is a desirable Bill, which enshrines in statute for the first time the independence of the Office for National Statistics and the UK statistical system. It makes huge improvements in the system and structure in place for the delivery of a trusted statistical system in the UK. The Bill is much too important to be put in jeopardy by the unelected Chamber continuing to send it back with demands for more changes, when we all now agree with 99 per cent. of what it contains. Moreover, the Government will wish to proceed quickly to appoint the new chair of the statistics board, with a parliamentary hearing and vote before the recess—the Treasury Committee is interviewing the gentleman in question this afternoon. That cannot seriously proceed without the Bill making progress. Nor can the establishment of a shadow board and the necessary preparatory work to achieve the independence of the Office for National Statistics by next April proceed quickly if the Bill's passage is further delayed.

I hope that the Opposition will not press for a Division on the motion. Given the amendments that the other place has achieved, I further hope that it will realise that the time is now right for the Bill to proceed. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 190.

Division No. 191] **[3.7 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George

Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Wayne David and Mark Tami

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Johnson, Mr. Boris
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian

Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maples, Mr. John
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Crispin Blunt and Mr. Richard Bacon

Question accordingly agreed to.

Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill

3.22 pm

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move,

That the period on the expiry of which proceedings on the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill shall lapse in pursuance of paragraph (13) of Standing Order No. 80A shall be extended by the period of seven days.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I am going to speak to the motion as well.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The right hon. Gentleman does not have to speak to the motion, which is on programming rather than the substantive matter. I will, of course, be guided by what he wishes to do.

Mr. Straw: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My mind was elsewhere.

I think I owe the House a brief explanation of the motion—*[Interruption.]* No, just a brief presentation. The short story is that the business motion will extend the deadline for the Bill by just seven days. I am moving the motion because the Government have tabled quite significant amendments, which I hope will meet the anxieties expressed both in this House and the other place. If we are to complete the business, it is important that we allow ourselves an extra week beyond the existing deadline.

Let me explain the situation to hon. Members who might not be aware of it. There is a deadline because this is a carry-over Bill. Under Standing Order No. 80A, such Bills usually last for only one year; tomorrow would be this Bill's deadline. The slight paradox is that hon. Members on both sides of the House support the principle of the Bill.

The remaining issue is whether and when the Bill should be extended to police and prison custody. The Government have tabled significant amendments in an effort to address concerns, but we will of course need time to debate them.

3.24 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has moved the motion. As late as last night, Baroness Ashton, the Minister in the other place, said that the Bill was hanging in the balance and that there was

"little to be gained by extending the time available...simply to prolong the passage of the Bill between this House and the other place."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 July 2007; Vol. 694, c. 137.]

The tabling of the motion at the eleventh hour ensures that the Bill will not fall on Friday and that we will have more time to consider it.

We are in unusual, if not uncharted, waters. It is exceptional for the other place to ask this House to think again by insisting for a fourth time. The fact that the other place has voted to include within the Bill's

remit the deaths of people in custody in police and prison cells no fewer than five times shows the strength of feeling. Indeed, hon. Members on both sides of the House have expressed their feelings about the matter.

The Bill received its First Reading in this House a year ago. It would have been quite wrong to allow the Bill to fall when the power to extend the timetable lay in the Government's hands. The Secretary of State was therefore right to move the motion.

We will debate the substantive issue shortly, but the Government have already conceded the principle that deaths in custody should be covered by the Bill. At the moment, that will happen by order. We have been discussing when that should happen. There is no point in extending the time for debate if the Government are unwilling to move on the question of when that should happen, or to tell the House more about their concerns about the immediate introduction of such a provision. We will now have time to reflect on those issues. However, given that it is clear that the Government again intend to reject the Lords amendments that propose an 18-month time frame, I hope that they will make a constructive proposal for a reasonable time frame. If they do not do so, I hope that the other place will be robust in insisting that its proposal is adhered to. We will listen with interest to what the Secretary of State says about that. However, I welcome the fact that he has conceded that further time is needed for reflection and possible compromise on this important issue.

3.27 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome the motion, of course, because the Bill deserves eventually to reach the statute book. As the Secretary of State said, hon. Members on both sides of the House support the Bill's basic principle. In previous debates, Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members were concerned about the suggestion that we were trying to kill the Bill. I am delighted that the Secretary of State has it made clear by tabling the motion that we were not trying to do that. We were trying to perform proper parliamentary scrutiny of the Bill. We were joining the other place to try to ensure that we had a Bill of the highest quality that addressed the concerns of hon. Members.

Ian Stewart (Eccles) (Lab): If the hon. Gentleman is sincere about not trying to kill the Bill, he will give the matter a good airing today, but vote for the Bill to go through.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but we need to hear from the Secretary of State what the concession will be. In due course, we will debate a Lords amendment that appears to go in the right direction, but we have not heard anything about time scales, which have been the issue time and again, both in the Commons and in the other place. Until we do, the hon. Gentleman should listen to the debate. We do not know whether the motion is the first phase of injury time or the penalty shoot-out. I hope that when the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box, he will provide a genuine concession, so that, all together, we can hold up the cup.

3.28 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am not sure that I share the enthusiasm expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey). The purpose of the motion is to extend the timetable by seven days—I do not mind that at all because, in principle, I am in favour of the Bill. However, I am not in favour of the Government's position on the Lords amendments. The Secretary of State has tabled a package of amendments, which I studied with considerable interest. They are extraordinarily difficult to understand. If they were tabled as a basis for compromise, I rather doubt that they serve as such.

The first thing that the Secretary of State must do, either in this debate or in the subsequent one, is tell us the extent to which the present package of amendments—and there are many of them—differs in kind from amendments Nos. 10A, 10C and 10D, which we debated on previous occasions. Are they substantially different, or not? Secondly, and quite differently, it is difficult for a layman to attach the various amendments to the Bill. It would be very much better, as we have seven days in which to do so, to produce a consolidated document so that Members of the Commons and the Lords can see in the Bill what we have been asked to do. I have expressed doubt that the Government amendments serve as the basis of compromise, which is why I am sceptical about what we have been asked to do. If they had provided such a basis, I would have been the first not to rise to my feet.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I always hesitate to intervene on the right hon. and learned Gentleman on a matter of procedure, but there is a clear distinction between the matter that we are discussing—the extension of time—and the substantive matter that we will discuss in a short while. I rather sense that the remarks that he wishes to make are more appropriate to the debate that is to come, rather than to this Question.

Mr. Hogg: As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am the last person to bandy words with the Chair, but you phrased your comments to me in such a way that I believe I can make the following response. The Secretary of State has come to the House to ask for extra time, on the grounds that he has introduced new proposals that may provide the basis for compromise. One is therefore entitled, in reply to his argument in support of the motion, to ask oneself whether it is the basis of compromise and whether it is a new package. That is why I have ventured to identify a few brief points, because I know that you will hold it against me if I go on for long in the next debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I had it in mind to say very briefly why I do not think it is a new package or a basis for compromise.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I will listen to the right hon. and learned Gentleman patiently for a little longer, and see if we can ourselves achieve a satisfactory compromise.

Mr. Hogg: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not need to strain your patience, because the points I want to make are brief, and I can express them in headline form.

[Mr. Hogg]

First, the powers in amendment (h)—one of the amendments that we debated previously—are permissive, not mandatory. Secondly, a timetable has not been prescribed. The phrase, "any category", means that the order that designates the categories may provide for a lesser set of circumstances than that provided for by the Lords amendment. Proposed subsection (2) enables the Government, in their order, to exempt circumstances and persons so that the categories are not covered in the same way as they are covered by the Lords amendments. Finally, the procedure to be followed is the affirmative resolution, which, while it is better than the negative resolution, does not allow for proper discussion or for amendment.

Those are the points that I wanted to make in support of my argument. I do not think that Government amendment (h) is different in kind from amendment 10A, which we have previously debated. In any event, it is not the proper basis for compromise. If those things are true, I query why we are extending the time by seven days, because we do not have the basis for a proper settlement.

3.34 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has raised an interesting problem, and I should like to ask the Government why they chose seven days. Do they know something that we do not that guarantees that there can be a resolution within seven days, or is it that seven days take us to the point at which they would like to adjourn the House for a stunning 10 weeks, which are completely free for proper scrutiny, analysis and questioning? I fear that it is the latter, and I should have thought that more time is needed, given the apparent gap that still exists between my right hon. and learned Friend and the Government.

3.34 pm

Mr. Straw: I think there is a rough consensus that we ought to have more time in which to debate the Bill. As for the point raised by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), I should have thought it was blindingly obvious that we sought the extra seven days because that would take us to the recess.

The right hon. Gentleman made an uncharacteristically cheap point about the length of the recess. I may be wrong about this, but I do not recall his being particularly vocal when I offered the House an opportunity to vote for September sittings.

Mr. Hogg: I certainly was not!

Mr. Straw: The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) tells us that he certainly was not. In any event, the offer was made, there was a free vote, and the House in its wisdom voted against a September sitting and in favour of the tabling of parliamentary questions in early September. So there is not much of a point to be made in that regard.

As for the substantive points that have been made, I think it best for us to proceed to the substantive debate, if the House agrees that we should extend the period by seven days.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the period on the expiry of which proceedings on the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill shall lapse in pursuance of paragraph (13) of Standing Order No. 80A shall be extended by the period of seven days.

Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill

Lords message insisting on amendments to which the Commons have disagreed, disagreeing to Commons amendments in lieu and proposing amendments in lieu of those Commons amendments.

Lords amendments Nos. 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 10P and 10Q.

3.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments Nos. 2,3,5,6 and 10; does not insist on its Amendments 10K to 10N in lieu but disagrees with the Lords in their Amendments 10P and 10Q in lieu of those amendments; and proposes Government amendments (a) to (j) in lieu.

For the benefit of Members who may be wondering on which piece of paper to find the amendments—I understand the concern of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who has, as ever, been assiduous—they are on page 1663, as amended. As the rubric states, that is

"due to the omission of a word in the Government motion."

Members—particularly those who have been debating it at some length—are familiar with the history of the Bill. We tabled it because we thought it important that there should be offences in respect of corporate manslaughter and corporate homicide. We have already accepted in principle the difference—which I shall explain shortly—between our amendment 10A, rejected in the other place, and the amendments that we are about to discuss.

The basis of last week's debate—which was dealt with by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), and for almost all of which I was present—was not whether the Government had accepted the principle of the application of the offence to deaths in custody, but whether we would ensure that that principle was exercised at some reasonable time in the future. The difference involved is significant.

I understand the objection that was raised. While doubts may be expressed and debating points made about the time that it has taken to travel this road to Damascus, at least we are on track now. The objection to the wording of amendment 10A lay in the fact that the provision for the Act to extend to deaths in custody—as it will—was discretionary, and was in the hands of the Secretary of State. The amendment stated

"The Secretary of State may by order make amendments"

to the law. It also stated what those amendments could cover, and proposed that the order should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.

Amendment (a) states that

"a duty is owed to a person who, by reason of being a person within subsection (1A), is someone for whose safety the organisation is responsible".

Subsection (1A) defines the different categories of custody. Amendment (b) defines a custodial institution, in a very wide sense, and a detained person. It also gives other definitions. Also, there is under amendment (h) the power to extend, but never to subtract from, the scope of custody as laid down by what will become section 2(1A). By order, that section will be able to

"include any category of person (not already included)".

In both cases, that must be done by affirmative procedure.

That is a significant change. Members of this House and the other place might argue about whether it is sufficient, and I will deal with the vexed issue of timing, but there is a significant difference between where we were and where we are now.

It is clear—not least in respect of the civil injuries compensation measures of a few years ago—that where a Bill is extended by inserting the word "shall" instead of "may", legitimate and understandable expectations may arise that the measures concerned must be exercised. Neither I nor any other Minister proposes to add this duty to the Bill with the cynical idea that it will not be activated.

I now wish to address the anxieties that were abroad—

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Before the Secretary of State moves on, let me say that his remarks highlight one of the problems in trying to relate a package of amendments to a Bill. I am unable to find in either the package or the Bill a statutory requirement that the Secretary of State should make an order implementing the duties in respect of the persons now designated as being covered. That is what I am looking for, but although it may well be in the package or the Bill, I cannot find it.

Mr. Straw: The precise wording that the right hon. and learned Gentleman searches for is not in the Bill, so it is unsurprising that he cannot find it. I do not accept the gravamen of the point. *[Interruption.]* As I have said, I will come on to the timing issue.

As has been explained, the problem lies in some of the complexities of bringing the proposed legislation into force in respect of police services and the Prison Service. That has been debated at length. The issue is not whether the power should be extended to custody—that has been conceded—but the exact circumstances. I must take account—as must the Home Secretary in respect of her responsibilities—of the current environment in which both the police and the Prison Service operate. They do not wish for it suddenly to become okay for there to be deaths in custody—unexplained deaths, not deaths by natural causes—and for them not to be inquired into, or for those responsible for negligence or worse in respect of those deaths not to be subject to any sanction.

I hope that all Members concede that there has over recent decades been a huge improvement in the treatment in police custody of persons arrested, from the moment of arrest. In my experience, there were never significant problems in the charge room; problems arose at the time of arrest, during transport to the police station and in the cells. Before we changed the law, one of the tasks that I, when I was Home Secretary, had to perform was act in effect as a final court of appeal on serious disciplinary appeals by police officers, some of which related to events in custody and dated back some years.

There was a sea change as a result of the introduction of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the codes under it, changes in police culture, the courts rightly becoming less tolerant of improper behaviour inside police stations, and the introduction of closed

[Mr. Straw]

circuit television—and subsequently an understanding by the police that they would be much better served if their behaviour in the custody areas and interview suites was recorded. Moreover, if there are unexpected or unexplained deaths in police custody, in almost all circumstances there is an immediate inquiry by the independent Police Complaints Authority. With the Prison Service, the circumstances are different, in that by that stage people have been sentenced—or at least, if they are awaiting trial, are not under interrogation.

3.45 pm

There have been significant improvements in the treatment of prisoners, as I have observed in the 10 years in which I have been in contact with the Prison Service. Improvements had been made before that as well, but we now have an effective inspectorate. The Bill will also place the Prison Service ombudsman on a statutory basis, which is another sign that we have listened to representations.

There are anxieties in the police and the Prison Service that unless they have time to understand fully the extent of these obligations and take steps to implement them, the services—not at a senior level, but at a lower level—will start to become risk averse, and that could have many adverse consequences.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): All of us have to accept that the police and the Prison Service will not be included immediately in the Bill when it becomes law. We have no illusions about that. What worries us—I am sure my right hon. Friend knows that the concern is widespread among Labour MPs and is by no means limited to the Opposition—is that it will be some considerable time before the police, and especially the Prison Service, are included. If my right hon. Friend could give some indication that inclusion will happen not too far in the future—perhaps in five or 10 years' time—it might satisfy some of us. I know that he is doing his best to try to find a compromise with the Lords, and I am pleased about that.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to other hon. Members who have expressed their concern in robust but restrained terms. My colleagues and I have listened with great care and this has been an iterative process—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) agrees with that.

I ask my hon. Friend and the House to listen to what I am about to say before saying that the period is too long. My concern is to ensure that the proposal is implemented, but that that is done without the police and the Prison Service seizing up because they become too risk averse. Such things take time. Let me make it clear that we are not allowing the services some sort of bye for a period during which they are not under scrutiny. As has been accepted by everyone, those services are always, and properly, under intensive scrutiny, both in terms of their systems and when, tragically, an unexplained death in custody occurs.

A reasonable period for managing the extension of the offence would be, we believe, something between five and seven years. I also believe that we should work on the basis of implementing the extension within an earlier time frame if at all possible. The pledge that I give to the House is that I will make every endeavour, as will other Ministers, to get it done in less time if that is at all possible. However, I ask the House not to underestimate the difficulties facing the Prison Service, which were the subject of some exchanges during Prime Minister's questions, and the police. I should be happy to have a knockabout about why the Prison Service is at capacity, but the truth is that that imposes its own pressures and demands on staff. I have the responsibility of managing those pressures in a way that is safe for both staff and inmates.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and also for the approach that he has adopted, but the period of time that he has identified is troublingly long. The problem is one of management, but he is suggesting that a structural problem exists. Given how the police and the Prison Service have operated over the years, I am very pessimistic about whether structural problems will ever be removed from the system. In respect of management difficulties, however, properly targeted plans and projects ought to be able to deliver the necessary changes in culture and practice within a reasonable time frame. I believe a period of five to seven years is excessively long, and it raises in my mind the anxiety that we are dealing with a structural problem. That should not be the case, because even under pressure, the police and the Prison Service should be able to deliver a level of service that would normally ensure that officers are not exposed to the risk of prosecution under this Bill.

Mr. Straw: I do not disagree with the burden of the hon. Gentleman's argument, and that is to some extent why I believe that what we are arguing about is not a great deal. As things stand, officers in the police and the Prison Service could easily be exposed to the risk of prosecution, if incidents of the kind that have been described in the past were to happen repeatedly. For example, a prison or police officer who commits an unlawful act that leads to death or injury has always been liable to prosecution: that has happened at various times in the past, and other offences are available that could apply to people responsible for outcomes of that sort.

Thankfully, however, there are only a tiny handful of homicides in prison every year. In addition, there are about 60 to 70 incidents of self-inflicted harm and suicides annually. That is 60 or 70 too many but, tragically, such things are going to happen in the best ordered prison. We are doing a great deal to get the numbers down, and we are also working very hard with the police service to the same end.

I agree that we should try to find a reasonable time that is less than five to seven years. I assure the hon. Member for Beaconsfield that I have no intention of sitting on my hands and saying, "Okay, that's fine." However, although I have a lot of experience of the Prison Service, I have in effect been abroad for five years, and I need to take some time to go into the detail about how long the period should be. The same is true of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary at the Home Office.

Finally, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield asks whether we are dealing with a structural or a management problem. One can never be certain, as some problems

can be both. Structural changes can be dealt with by changes in management practice that are followed by changes in the culture. I do not want to argue about that, but the other truth is that we will benefit if we take some time over the work in hand. Bluntly, I do not want us to find ourselves in the situation that has faced certain organisations in respect of health and safety.

The House of Commons is a famous example of that. An awful lot of time was spent on a risk assessment as to whether someone could go out through the double doors and run up a flag on the mansard-roof of Portcullis house. It was not until I insisted on taking the risk myself that we were able to break through the problem, with the result that the flag is now flying. Funnily enough, the introduction of a bolt changed everything.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: Of course I will, in one second. Some of the cultural issues involved in the problem need to be dealt with in any event, and that is why I promise the House that I shall pursue the matter as quickly as possible. However, I will not promise an overall time scale that I am not presently satisfied can be delivered. It may be uncomfortable for me to say that now, but that is better than being quite properly accused later of saying something just to get the legislation through, and producing a time scale that, for various reasons, we are unable to meet.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Straw: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, after I have given way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore).

Mr. Dismore: The time scale does seem rather long, but as I have said before, the date is more important than the length of time. May I put two suggestions to my right hon. Friend? First, will he consider coming back to the House with regular reports—say annually—on the progress towards implementation, which might make a significant contribution? Secondly, has he considered the possibility of different dates for different parts of the service? For example, the date for the police could be earlier than the date for the Prison Service, because the police could probably comply with the provisions much more quickly.

Mr. Straw: First, I am happy to provide regular reports. I am open to suggestions, but I am certainly happy to ensure that there is a report at least once a year and, if there is a demand for it, more often than that. I hope that that is acceptable. That is a reasonable way of keeping us all on our toes on the issue. Secondly, it is perfectly possible for the introduction to take place on a phased basis. I certainly have it in mind that we might be able to do that.

Mr. Llwyd: As a criminal lawyer, I was involved in the implementation of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that Act was phased. Although the Act involved a huge cultural change, it has worked perfectly well. The whole package came in, however, in a matter of one year to 18 months. I agree with the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore): the police might be able to come up to speed sooner than the Prison Service. However, this is a worthy Bill, and providing too long a delay for the Prison Service tends to give the wrong message outside the Chamber.

Mr. Straw: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and he is absolutely right about PACE. I was in practice for only a short while in the 1970s, but the situation then was patently unsatisfactory. People said we should move away from the judges rules and the rather informal arrangements that allowed all kinds of short cuts to be taken, and which ultimately undermined confidence in the police, as well as in the criminal justice system. However, I disagree with him slightly—well, more than slightly—on the time scale. He may recall that the Police and Criminal Evidence Act was introduced in the Parliament of 1979 to 1983, but fell and had to be reintroduced, and then the codes had to be put together. So in practice the time scale was longer, although it may not have been as long as the one that I have suggested in this instance.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Secretary of State needs to understand what he is asking the House to agree to. First, he is asking us to agree to a time scale that is not going to appear in the Bill. Secondly, he is asking us to agree to a very long time scale, but he has given us no real justification of why that is needed. He has hinted and implied, but the House deserves to hear the detail of why he thinks we should accept such a long delay. Without that sort of detail, which we have not heard at any stage, the House cannot agree to what he is asking.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman has to make a choice and so, with great respect, has the other place. As a result of the concern that has been expressed by both sides, there has been a significant change in the nature of the Bill. There is a big difference between the inclusion in the Bill of a power that says "may", and the inclusion of custody in the Bill—where the only issue is when that is introduced. I have made quite significant and categorical remarks about the time scale for phasing in. As the hon. Gentleman may know, those remarks can be adduced in any proceedings if there is an issue of ambiguity.

If I had the detail of exactly why we should have a certain time scale, I would bring it before the House. It is precisely because I have not got that detail, and I need time to produce it, that I have to be cautious in the time scale that I am offering. I am being perfectly frank with the House. Of course, if there were some calculation that showed the time scale should be x rather than y, the House should and would be allowed to see it. However, because of my concerns, the concerns expressed to me by the Prison Service, and the concerns expressed through my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in respect of the police service, we have had to be cautious; I would like not to be so cautious. I have set out an overall time frame of five to seven years, but I have said that if we can get that number of years down, we will do so. I have agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon that we will provide reports on the situation at least annually, and from my experience of government I can tell the

[Mr. Straw]

hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) that that will provide its own momentum, regardless of whether I am still in place leading on the Act in future, as I hope to be

4 pm

Mr. Hogg: Will the Secretary of State forgive me for reminding him that I have been the Minister with responsibility for prisons? I have had the advantage of presiding over the Prison Service, as has he; in my case, it was at the time when we moved to a private contract for transport to courts. The idea that it takes five to seven years to put in place new systems, give appropriate directions or ensure proper supervision is for the birds. That should be done in a year or two, not five to seven years. That, I am afraid, is a failure on the part of Ministers not to insist. The Secretary of State has got to insist; that is what he is there for.

Mr. Straw: Well, I am quite sure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman was altogether a more effective Minister than I am. He was an effective Minister, if I may say so—I will cut out the sarcasm. I would like to be in the position that he set out, but I am not, although I hope to be. Meanwhile, it would be wrong of me to offer a time scale to which we could not adhere. I do not think that there is a great deal of difference between the parties on that point. The last thing that I shall say, because others wish to contribute in this relatively short debate—

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Straw: I wonder whether I might just wind up, as I am taking up other people's time. We have moved a great deal, and we have extended the time, so that we do not have to consider the matter in the terrible rushed manner that I have sometimes seen used by both parties when in government. We have shifted; there is no question about that.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being very patient. It might help his case if he told the House what changes would need to be made to custody arrangements to allow custody to be included in the legislation.

Mr. Straw: If I knew that at this stage—I have been in post for just under three weeks—I would tell the House. I see the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham screwing up his face, but it is precisely because I do not know the answer that I am having to be cautious, and so is my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. That is the truth of it. If I had the information, why would I not give it to the House? Neither my ministerial colleagues nor I have any wish to be in a situation in which there is distrust and suspicion about our motives. It is thought that we have made up our concerns and our caution in respect of the police service and the Prison Service, but we have not. What I have said is not everything, but it is certainly a great deal, and I hope that the House and the other place will now accept the amendments, and what I have said on the record, in the spirit in which they were intended.

Mr. Grieve: Having listened to the right hon. Gentleman, I have to admit that there is a certain irony to this debate. I wonder what would have happened if the Government had originally included deaths in custody as part of the body of the Bill—that is the form in which it now appears—and if the provisions on death in custody had come in with all the other orders. The usual assumption made in Parliament is that if the Government are legislating, they wish to implement something. My experience, from my five or six years' involvement with criminal justice legislation, has led to the realisation that much of the legislation that the Government pass never gets implemented; indeed, at times in the past five years, I have participated in the repeal of legislation that, having been put on the statute book two or three years earlier, was never brought into force by order.

In a sense, the Government are hoist with their own petard. They displayed massive intransigence about the whole concept of deaths in custody, particularly in the persona of the previous Home Secretary, who came to the House on Report and expressed himself in vituperative terms on the mere suggestion that deaths in custody should be included in the body of the legislation. The Government now find themselves facing a serious crisis of confidence over their willingness ever to implement, or at least within a reasonable time frame, what many Members on both sides of the House regard as a very important part of the legislation.

So we find ourselves arguing over a single issue: how long it will take to implement what is now pretty much in proper form for deaths in custody. Although we have never laid a benchmark for the implementation of other parts of the Bill because we are confident that the Government will move swiftly to observe the terms of the Warwick agreement, quite apart from the consensus across the House that it is a beneficial piece of legislation, we are arguing over the fact that the Government have been dragged reluctantly into including deaths in custody and now wish to postpone the evil day for as long as possible. I am not surprised that the other place has become increasingly insistent that 18 months ought to be sufficient.

That raises a difficult issue for the right hon. Gentleman. Throughout the passage of the Bill, the last thing that I have wanted to do is to make party political capital, but a period of five to seven years is a long time.

Mr. Straw: As the hon. Gentleman asks about the date of implementation of the main part of the Bill, I am happy to announce that it is our intention that it be implemented on 6 April 2008. As he knows, it is for the convenience of business that Acts like this, which affect business, are implemented on one of two set dates in the year. I hope that is helpful.

Mr. Grieve: That is indeed helpful, and it is exactly the sort of time frame that I would have expected. It highlights, if I may say so, the difference between what will be done to everybody else, and what will affect the Prison Service, the custodial environment and the police. The right hon. Gentleman earlier prayed in aid the health and safety legislation. As I think he knows, that is the area in which I practised in the years before

coming to this place—*[Interruption.]* I did not introduce the legislation. I prosecuted on behalf of the Health and Safety Executive or local authorities, or represented those who got had got themselves into trouble.

Defendants who had killed their own employees—that happens all the time—used to say, "It's all so difficult. Bringing about the culture change in our organisation has proved so problematical. We do our best, but sometimes things go wrong. We accept that, and if we only had longer, we might have avoided this." There are great lamentations, to which Parliament has responded serially with the word "Tough"—that is, "Tough maybe, but we want to bring about the culture change, and you are going to have to take the necessary steps to meet the requirements."

What troubles me is that what we are hearing from the Government is, "The culture is going to be so difficult to change and we don't want to press the services all that much." This is not an issue that can be dictated by the current problems in the Prison Service. Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman why. I am sure he would be the first to admit that the idea that over the next 100 years the Prison Service or the police will not have to cope again with periods when there are problems of overcrowding is a fantasy. That has been a perennial issue for a long time, yet I detect that he is waiting for a magical moment when suddenly the problems of the Prison Service are sufficiently assuaged that the measure can be implemented.

However, the issue is a managerial one, and it is precisely in periods of difficulty that the services will be put on their mettle. The idea that that will lead to some terrible problem is wrong. If they carry out their duties properly, even if there are deaths in custody, there will be no risk of prosecution. It is in cases where there has been gross negligence, which is what we are discussing, that the services will be called to account.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend constantly says that the problem is a managerial one and in a sense it is, but ultimately it is one that requires the exercise of political will, because the managers will never want to do what the measure requires of them. It is a ministerial, political problem, not primarily a managerial one. Managers will respond to what they are told to do.

Mr. Grieve: Yes, I entirely agree. It is necessary for the Government to show leadership in this matter. It is worth bearing in mind the fact that the provisions that we have put on to the statute book will not lead to individual prosecutions—the prosecutions will be of the corporate entities involved. That may lead, I suppose, to resignations and public shaming, but those are the very things that the Government say—I happen to agree with them—will be a good thing as regards the commercial sector, so why are these particular organisations being mollycoddled and protected in a wholly excessive way?

Ian Stewart (Eccles) (Lab): It is a bit rich for the hon. Gentleman to pray in aid the line that the Government took when he argued in Committee that there should be no named person and no imprisonment sanction. I am wholly in favour of considering this complex matter, but not at the expense of the Bill, which it is imperative that we get through. He understands that a trade-off was involved when the Lords tabled these amendments, which meant that other issues important to some of us, such as corporate probation, fell off the end of the table. This is a compromise situation, and I urge Members not to push it to the point where we lose the Bill.

Mr. Grieve: First, I wish to see the Bill on the statute book, and I hope that the way in which the Opposition have conducted themselves throughout its passage illustrates that hugely. Secondly, I understand the hon. Gentleman's point but do not think that it is a particularly good one. The Bill does indeed have compromises embodied in it. He was minded to include personal liability of directors and would have been happy for them to go to prison for their part in corporate manslaughter offences. Apart from the fact that I did not support that—I thought that it was wrong in principle and explained why—if we had it in the Bill now, that might colour my view of the extension to the custodial environment, but it is not there, and for very good reason. As a result, we are not talking about prison governors, or managers, going to prison but about the corporate responsibility of these bodies.

I want to bring my remarks to a close as we have little time left. Let me say this to the Secretary of State. The Government need to show leadership and to give an assurance to this House, or in the other place when the Bill returns there, on a reasonable time frame for implementation, as five to seven years is inordinately long. It may be a period that is much further away than next April but nevertheless clearly shows the Government's will to implement immediately the steps that are required at a managerial level and ensure that these services come on board within a reasonable period. I urge the Secretary of State to do that, because if he does not there is a risk that this ping-pong will continue. Listening to his remarks, many in this House and in the other place will remain profoundly depressed—*[Interruption.]* I will happily give way to him if he wishes to intervene.

Mr. Straw: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, as he knows, but he is advancing a very weak argument. I did give a time frame, although he does not agree with all of it. I said that the maximum period was between five and seven years, and I very much hope to do it in less than that. I have said that we will have an annual report. I will deal with some of the other points that he raised in terms of getting that time down. However, it seems that he is now trying to find excuses for continuing to block the Bill, and I find his arguments unconvincing.

Mr. Grieve: I am sorry about the right hon. Gentleman's tone, because that is the very thing that I do not seek to do. I am actually trying to show him the way home. I think that we are very close to resolving this issue, but I respectfully suggest to him that that requires the Government to be a little more proactive on the timetable than they have been.

I cannot support the measures this afternoon and I urge my colleagues to maintain their support for the Lords amendment. However, before the Bill goes back to the other place, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to consult his colleagues and point out to them that the

[Mr. Grieve]

time frame is too long, so that even if an assurance that the time frame will be shorter cannot be given here, it can be given in the other place.

4.15 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Perhaps I can help the Government, through my hon. Friend. I have noticed during the past 18 months, in visiting about 25 prisons and young offender institutions, that the health service system there is overloaded by mental health patients and those affected by substance abuse, which may be causing the Government to want to pause. If we were to come to an agreement with the Government about what might be a reasonable time frame within which they could mend health services in the prison system, we might reach a proper agreement. However, I urge my hon. Friend not to allow anything anywhere near five to seven years to be part of such an arrangement.

Mr. Grieve: I can reassure my hon. and learned Friend that for us, five to seven years is far too long. However, and I want to emphasise this, the Secretary of State is going in the right direction; I just urge him to take an extra leap of leadership to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

Ian Stewart: I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's feelings about five to seven years being too long. Will he tell us what he thinks would be a reasonable length of time?

Mr. Grieve: I have had discussions with the Secretary of State for Justice and he knows my views on this matter very well. I do not think that it will be difficult for the right hon. Gentleman to find a formula, and he can speak to us at any stage if he wishes to, or come to the Dispatch Box. I heard some voices shouting out various suggestions. We are not involving ourselves in an auction here; it would not be difficult to find a solution that is reasonable for him, the services and the integrity of the Government. I say to him that otherwise, it would look as if leadership had vanished in this area.

Those are my concluding remarks. I thank the Secretary of State for what he has done because I am aware that it might have taken quite a lot even to get this far, but I ask him to go the extra mile, or perhaps the extra year or two.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): We are, as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said, inching forward in the right direction. I have been present on half a dozen occasions when this issue has been visited and it is the first time I have heard any form of time frame escape from the lips of a Minister. That is progress, therefore, and we must acknowledge it. It is also a recognition of the fact that my right hon. Friend has got a grip on an issue that has been drifting for a long time. He is well known for his extremely sensitive political antennae, and he is also a leading exponent of the political principle that when one is in a hole, one should stop digging. I have a great deal of confidence that we are moving in the right direction.

My right hon. Friend referred to cultural change. That is what is required; it was what was required in 1983 before the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, and it is required here. We are up against a mighty vested interest in the shape of the Prison Service and, as the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said, when we come up against a vested interest, we have to face it down. It is not a management issue, but one of political will.

The five-to-seven-year period mentioned is, as others have said, a disappointingly long period, progress though it is. On past form, I think that we shall have to run through three or four Secretaries of State before we reach five or seven years. If one looks at the record in certain Departments—not necessarily the ones that my right hon. Friend has occupied—there is a high turnover of Ministers. After three or four Secretaries of State, one can end up far removed from the original good and sincere intentions that my right hon. Friend doubtless has.

Mr. Straw: What I have said, for those who appreciate the way in which the courts view such matters, is significant. The Secretary of State's functions continue, regardless of the person who occupies the position. As a matter of correction, I was Home Secretary for four years and Foreign Secretary for five years.

Mr. Mullin: I am well aware of that, and I regard my right hon. Friend's career as one of the most successful of any member of the Government. However, if he considers other Departments, he will realise that we are on our seventh and eighth Minister for various responsibilities. Time is short and I therefore ask him not to provoke me into listing them, but I could do that.

I hope that my right hon. Friend will take up the sensible suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on phasing in.

Mr. Straw: I will.

Mr. Mullin: I am glad to hear that. If it is easier to deal with the police, perhaps that could be done first.

I shall support my right hon. Friend today, but in the hope that the extra time that he has won will be used to nail down a credible time scale and to include it in the Bill. I am confident that, with him in charge, we will get there in the end. I hope that I shall not be disappointed.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Grossly negligent management that leads to the death of somebody in custody is wrong now; it was wrong last month and it was wrong five years ago. Why is the Secretary of State not prepared to make it an offence for another five years? When the issue is presented so starkly, one realises that the Government's position is not strong.

The Government appear to be prepared to make some sort of concession, but it has been dragged out of them and, even now, it is not clear where we will end up. The Government must do better than the Secretary of State's offer today. He rightly said that we are considering a maximum—I am grateful for that—and that he wants to lessen the time. He also said that he wants annual reports.

However, other Departments have been braver and more certain about what they can achieve. I have examined many public service agreement targets and I remember one from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to reduce the production of poppies for opium in Afghanistan by 60 per cent. in three years. The Foreign Office did not achieve that, but it was its main target. It intended to do that brave thing. Yet the Ministry of Justice claims that it cannot sort out in five to seven years the management failures to which it now admits in the Prison Service and the police service. I am sorry, but that it is not good enough. It is wrong and the Government need to push harder.

In previous debates here and in the other place, we asked why the Government are not prepared to move faster. Why were not they previously prepared to give even an indicative time scale? We have not received good answers. The only answer that we received before today was that they were worried about creating an incentive for risk aversion in the services that we are considering. When we debated the matter, convincing examples of risk aversion were not given. Risk aversion in the case of someone who may be vulnerable and prone to attempting suicide is a good idea. One must err on the side of caution to ensure that that person does not take their own life. The Government's argument could therefore be reversed. The sooner the proposals are introduced, the more likely prison governors and senior police officers are to take action to ensure that such deaths do not occur.

I accept that the Secretary of State has to deal with senior managers who will tell him that they are under extreme pressure in trying to deliver other Government objectives and worried that they cannot deliver the new provision safely for him.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about risk aversion. Perhaps he would care to remind the House that the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions is a necessary pre-condition of prosecution. That would take account of many anxieties that underpin the Secretary of State's demand for five to seven years.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes an important point. It is why the Secretary of State should say to senior managers, who, frankly, represent vested interests, "I am sorry, but we want leadership." The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) stressed the need for that. The Secretary of State, as the politician in charge, should demand that senior managers get their act together. I do not think that that is an unreasonable request of a Secretary of State to make of senior managers.

The Secretary of State has a good reputation in all parts of the House for showing leadership. The fact that he has already been prepared to concede in a way that his predecessor was not is very welcome. However, his reputation will be even stronger and will deserve great praise if he moves further. I urge him to do that. When those in the other place reflect on this debate and all the voices that have been heard throughout the House, they will say that the Secretary of State has further to travel.

Mr. Dismore: May I say in response to earlier comments in the debate that everybody in the House wants to see the Bill passed? Indeed, I have been campaigning for it for 20 years, and I do not think that anybody is trying to frustrate it. Also, the amendments before us are a major change from the original position, which is very good. Personally, I would always like to see "shall" rather than "may". My right hon. Friend referred to the criminal injuries compensation case. In fact, I was the solicitor in that case on behalf of the appeal of the applicants against the then Conservative Government, and I was pleased that we beat them in the House of Lords.

Putting that to one side, I have to say that the real issue that we are talking about is the timetable. Like others, I am concerned about the timetable, but giving a date is at least a starting point. I saw that Lord Hunt, speaking on behalf of the Opposition in the other place, agreed with me that

"naming the day is more important than the specific date."

I therefore hope that the Opposition will not resile from that. In response to the debate, my right hon. Friend Baroness Ashton said:

"the Government are committed to bringing the custody issue forward through the order-making power"—

as it then was—

"when it is clear that we not only understand the implications of the legislation as it now stands but have taken part in discussions with those directly affected, in order to ensure that the implications of such a power are fully understood in public policy especially as it applies to the Prison Service and to custody in general."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 July 2007; Vol. 694, c. 146-49.]

That is absolutely right. That is what should happen: we should work out what the implications of the proposal are and then come forward with the date when we are going to implement it. That has not happened, but if it were to happen, we would come up with a much earlier date. I understand the position that my right hon. Friend is in, however. He cannot do that. In the seven days that we have, perhaps more work could be done on that and perhaps we could find a compromise timetable—three to five at the outside perhaps, but with the proposal being implemented much earlier, as I have suggested, for the police, for example, who do not have the problem of overcrowding in police cells. We heard about the problem of risk aversity, but there is no issue of risk aversity in some of those places. What we are looking for is the deterrent effect, which the proposal would bring into effect, to ensure that things are done properly.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's undertaking that we will have regular reports on implementation, so I shall certainly be voting with the Government. There is still a little way to go, but they have moved significantly by naming the date, which was the key demand when this battle started many months ago.

Mr. Hogg: You were kind enough to call me in the first debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I know that other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall be brief.

First, it would be churlish not to welcome what has been done thus far, and I think that the House would acknowledge that. Secondly, it is the view of most hon. Members participating in this debate that five to seven years is too long. To take up the point that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) made, it is worth reminding ourselves that unsafe systems, which are basically what we are talking about, are wrong in principle.

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

I recognise that the Secretary of State is concerned about what, for brevity, I would loosely refer to as unfair prosecutions, which would come at a time that was oppressive to management. That is what is really worrying him. However, that concern is actually met to a very high degree by the requirement in the Bill that the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions is a necessary precondition to prosecution.

Mr. Straw: That is one anxiety and it takes some time—I hope as short as possible—to work through, but another anxiety is that which people who have not been party to these debates feel inside such complicated systems. The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that it was all a matter of political will. If it were all a matter of political will, things would be dead easy, but there must also be judgments, which is why, if I may say so, the target on drugs in Afghanistan did not quite work out as intended, so the issue involves both. That is what we are having to manage, but we will do it as quickly as we can.

Mr. Hogg: I was coming on to my fifth and last point. I accept what the Secretary of State has said, but culture changes have to be driven from above because they will always be resisted. I recall being the Whip in the Home Office when the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 was introduced and there was enormous resistance from within the police to many of the changes, particularly interviewing, forced through by PACE. The Secretaries of State insisted and the management will always respond to insistence. If the Secretary of State were to put forward a 12-month or 24-month period, I suspect that that would be longer than need be, but I am sure that the House and the other place would agree to it. That is the sort of period that is required—not five to seven years. That is all I want to say.

4.30 pm

Mr. Redwood: I, too, believe that the Secretary of State for Justice has moved in the right direction and I thank him for that. He is one of the few Labour Ministers I would trust: I think that his word means something in this House and I am sure that he is well intentioned. He must understand, however, how difficult it is for us to accept his word when it relates to a period after the next general election. It is extremely unlikely that either he or a Labour Government would then be in office—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I obviously hope that there will be a change of governing party to the Conservatives, but there might be no overall control in the House of Commons—and there are all sorts of possibilities that would make it very difficult for the right hon. Gentleman to honour his pledge.

In the meantime, as the Liberal Democrats so rightly pointed out on this occasion, it must be a matter of grave concern to all of us that a decent man who is Secretary of State for Justice cannot reassure the House that custody in this country is being sufficiently well managed for it to be under this legislation. He is newly in post and trying to get to grips with it. He tells us that his officials are telling him that there could be acts of gross negligence leading to death in custody, but that they do not feel that anything can yet be done about it. Surely that is a matter of grave urgency.

Mr. Straw: Let me explain to the right hon. Gentleman that no official has said that to me and I do not believe that any officials have said it at any stage to any of my right hon. Friends. At no stage has that argument been advanced. None of us wants to see gross negligence or failure in systems. A huge amount has already been done in the police and prison services to ensure that such a situation does not develop.

Mr. Redwood: I am glad to hear that reassurance, but it makes it even stranger that we are dealing with a period of five to seven years. I shall therefore vote with my Front-Bench spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

Mr. Straw: This has been an interesting debate and I am grateful for the acknowledgement of the changes made as a result of this set of amendments. I am pleased better to have informed the right hon. and learned Member for—is it still Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg)? *[Interruption.]* Well, it changes every election. *[Interruption.]* I had forgotten that Grantham is Labour now! It is significant that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is better informed about the amendment.

A number of slightly odd claims have been made. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) talked about the Prison Service over the next 100 years—a much longer time frame than I have in mind. He then said that there would always be pressure on the Prison Service. I have clocked that; we bear it mind, because at some stage over the next 100 years, there may well be a Conservative Government. I can offer the hon. Gentleman some fraternal advice—not to be too free and easy with the suggestion that if there were a Conservative Government, there would never be any problems with prisons. I do not believe that that would be the case.

The hon. Gentleman then said that implementing the law quickly could lead to some "terrible problem". That is nonsense. I never said that it would lead to a terrible problem. I have been careful in what I said, as have my right hon. and hon. Friends. What I have said is that we need time to assess the situation, and we do. I apologise to the House for having to say that, but it just happens to be true.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I say that as well as undertaking to publish at least an annual report on progress, which I am happy to do, we will certainly look carefully into implementing these measures by stages. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) for saying that he at least trusts me—he then made it clear that he certainly would not trust a Minister in a Conservative Government, and we have noted that too. We do intend to take such action; otherwise, we would not put such a provision in the Bill. The quicker we can make progress, the less people will have to look into a crystal ball, because they will be able to see from the action taken that we are doing it.

I urge the whole House to recognise that considerable progress has been made, and that it is now time for agreement, both on what is in the Bill, as we hope, and on what I have said.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 188.

Division No. 192] **[4.35 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cabom, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth

Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Dave Watts and Siobhain McDonagh

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clegg, Mr. Nick
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Herbert, Nick
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Johnson, Mr. Boris
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maples, Mr. John
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Thurso, John
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Richard Benyon and Mr. Crispin Blunt

Question accordingly agreed to.

OFFENDER MANAGEMENT BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 83A(7) (Programme motions),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Offender Management Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 11th December 2006 and 28th February 2007 (Offender Management Bill (Programme) and Offender Management Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement at this day's sitting.

2. The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order, namely: 6, 22, 11, 14, 4 , 1 to 3, 5, 7 to 10, 12, 13, 15 to 21, 23 to 56.

Subsequent stages

3. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

4. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—*[Mark Tami.]*

Question agreed to.

Offender Management Bill

Clause 3

POWER TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE PROVISION OF PROBATION SERVICES

Lords amendment: No. 6.

4.50 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Mr. David Hanson): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 8 and the Government motion to disagree thereto and Government amendment (a) in lieu thereof, Lords amendment No. 9 and the Government motion to disagree, Lords amendment No. 12 and the Government motion to disagree, and Lords amendment No. 13 and the Government motion to disagree.

Mr. Hanson: May I begin by expressing the Government's appreciation of the very careful scrutiny that the Bill received in another place? Much good work has been done and many improvements have been made, and I thank my noble Friend Baroness Scotland and colleagues in another place and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), who is now Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, for the work that they undertook in guiding the Bill through Committee and another place. As Members will know, I took up my post eight weeks ago, but the Bill has been in existence for a considerable period, so I pay tribute to my colleagues for the work that they have done.

The concerns that hon. Members expressed on Report and Third Reading have now been addressed in another place and we have a better Bill as a result. It may be helpful to remind the House and colleagues of what the Bill will achieve and why it is so important. The statutory duty to deliver probation services lies with 42 individual probation boards, which are working to centrally-set targets and whose chief officers are directly line-managed by the director of probation in Whitehall. The arrangement was introduced after the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 was passed, and it has delivered a great deal. Some 97 per cent. of pre-sentence reports to magistrates courts are delivered within the deadline specified by the court, and there has been a considerable increase in the number of unpaid work completions—55,000 last year, against a target of 50,000, which represents an increase of over 4,000 compared with 2005-06.

We can be proud of the fact that probation workers are dedicated, are working strongly and have put into effect a number of key measures, including on unpaid work. However, the House would want me to understand the need to consolidate those gains. The task of tackling the issue of reoffending is a complex one, and we need to do the best that we can to ensure that the best available providers are engaged. To date, about 96 per cent. of services have been provided in-house by probation boards. We need to do more to involve other providers in support of the public sector, particularly, may I tell my hon. Friends, to support the work that it undertakes. We need, too, to move towards more outcome-focused arrangements that free providers from all sectors to innovate.

The Bill as drafted lifts from probation boards the statutory duty for making arrangements for probation services, and places it firmly on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor. It creates new public sector bodies, probation trusts, with which the Secretary of State may contract. That does not mean that my right hon. Friend will run services directly from Whitehall. What we are proposing, and what I hope the House will accept, is a coherent structure that enables services to be commissioned at an appropriate level with clear lines of accountability. Commissioning of services under the new arrangements—I hope that this will reassure all hon. Members—will take place at national, regional and local levels. That has been of concern to several of my hon. Friends, and I hope that the discussions that we have had during the passage of the Bill have helped them to understand where we are with the particular service that I am seeking to introduce.

Patrick Hall (Bedford) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has just mentioned a very significant and welcome development in the way in which the Bill is considered. Does he see any merit in including that in the Bill, so that there can be no doubt that commissioning will take place at the most appropriate level—local, regional and, if necessary, national?

Mr. Hanson *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps, having given some of the background, the Minister will now limit his remarks to the amendments under discussion.

Mr. Hanson: I will, Madam Deputy Speaker, but commissioning at national, regional and local level, to which my hon. Friend referred, is exactly what the Government are trying to achieve in the Bill, and the opposite of what the Lords amendment proposes. I can assure my hon. Friend that commissioning will take place at national, regional and local level. I say that for the simple reason that the issue is at the heart of the amendment that we are discussing.

My hon. Friend asked whether we could at some point consider including that description in the Bill. I hope he will accept the spirit in which I have spoken today, the spirit in which I have spoken in other discussions about the Bill, and indeed the spirit that contrasts so starkly with the proposal from another place for commissioning only at local level.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend agrees with Lord Falconer, who said about commissioning in his speech at the centenary conference of the probation service

"Sometimes it will be done regionally or nationally…but I see this as the exception rather than the rule"?

Local commissioning would be the norm, he said.

Mr. Hanson: That goes to the heart of the amendments, which is why I have focused on it from the outset. I entirely agree with what the then Lord Chancellor said at the conference. There will be a mixture of commissioning.

[Mr. Hanson]

Some will be at national level, because in certain cases and with certain contracts that will be the best way of securing a strong and efficient service. There will also be a strong role for those commissioning work at regional level. As my hon. Friend surely accepts, economies of scale will sometimes be necessary, and some services will be best purchased and commissioned at that level. However, there will also be a need for local probation trusts to act not just as service deliverers but as commissioners of services from the voluntary sector, or from others, providing a proper service to help prevent reoffending at local level.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): May I press my right hon. Friend a little further on the proportions of the total probation work that he expects to be commissioned at national, local and regional level? Will more than 50 per cent. definitely be commissioned at local level?

Mr. Hanson: I cannot give my hon. Friend any assurances about what will be commissioned at national, regional or local level. What I will say is that it is—I hope—self-evident that certain services need to be provided at national level, and others at regional level. I hope and believe that a considerable amount will be provided at local level, but for reasons I think my hon. Friend will understand, I am not in a position to assure him of that today. We need to examine in detail some of the services that will be provided.

I can say today that, in the case of most services, regional commissioners will make arrangements with lead providers, who, in turn, will act as both providers and commissioners for the probation area. Provided that their performance meets the required standard, as I believe it will in most cases, the lead providers will be the probation trusts. They will concentrate on delivering core offender management work, while commissioning interventions at local level. I believe that they will welcome that, and that it will help the Bill's passage through the House of Commons.

The Government oppose the Lords amendments because they seek to undermine the entire basis of our proposals to improve the delivery of probation services. When they were debated in another place, their supporters were unequivocal in their backing for greater involvement of providers from other sectors, particularly the voluntary sector. Speaking to the amendments on behalf of the Opposition, Lady Anelay said:

> "We have no philosophical or political objection to probation services being provided from outside the existing public provision."—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 21 May 2007; Vol. 692 c. 552.]

That was consistent with what the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) said when summing up for the Opposition on Third Reading. It is therefore hard for me to understand why the Opposition have tabled their amendments, as those who support them claim that the Government proposals in part 1 are centralising—but as I have explained, they are not. They allow the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor to determine what needs to be commissioned, as is his responsibility. There will therefore be clear accountability and responsibility in respect of what he at the national level asks regional commissioners to commission, and there will also be clarity in respect of what they in turn ask of local commissioning boards. The amendment would destroy that clear accountability and that focus in national, regional and local commissioning by removing completely the local element and not sufficiently clarifying the relationship between the Secretary of State and the local trusts.

5 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): The Minister is in danger of conflating two separate arguments and therefore of misleading himself. There is a distinction between my views on the amendments and the structure that the Bill provides and those of Labour Members such as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard). He disapproves of the contracting-out of what has until now been a state-provided service—that is what the argument over contestability is about. On the other hand, I have no philosophical objection to contestability, but I do have an argument with the Government—with which the hon. Gentleman might agree—about the top-down micro-management of the probation services from the Secretary of State's office via his various subordinate quango offices. So long as the Minister understands the distinction between those two, or possibly three, sets of arguments, he will not mislead himself or the House.

Mr. Hanson: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for ensuring that I do not mislead myself, but let me say that I am clear about the points I making to the House today. I am aware that my hon. Friends hold the views he has described on contracting out. I fully expect the vast majority of current probation boards—in future, probation trusts—to have sufficient quality to be able to secure services at local level and then be in a position to determine, with regional support and a national framework and direction, the services that they provide. I am also clear, however, that we will need to ensure that we raise the standards of probation trusts that do not meet the standards that we expect as, sadly, some current probation boards underperform. We must raise standards, and I have every confidence that we can do that within the framework of the public sector—with the vast majority of trusts remaining public sector-based and delivering services at the local level, and with support from regional commissioners and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

I do not support the amendments as they would remove the regional structure; it is claimed that services provided at regional level could not provide economies, and the issue of potentially underperforming probation trusts at the local level is not tackled, because no meaningful clarification is offered of the relationship between the Secretary of State and the trusts. The amendments would do a disservice to people whom all Members wish to be supported; we all want offenders in the probation service to be helped not to reoffend.

There is an honest disagreement. I hold a different view from that held in another place, and I am trying to explain it. I hope that I will secure the support not only of the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) but of my hon. Friends. The amendments sound appealing but they are not realistic, and Governments deal with reality. The proposals in part 1 of the Bill will

enable probation services to be delivered by a range of providers, and to be tailored to local needs and set within a clear framework of accountability.

That clear and consistent approach should be contrasted with that suggested by the amendments. It is claimed that the amendments provide for local commissioning, but they do not. They would give us the worst of all worlds. They do not provide the means to ensure greater involvement for other providers and they do not provide for any meaningful accountability. Nor do they provide the means for entering into a mature dialogue when concerns about performance arise, as they will with some underperforming boards, save for the blunt instrument of making provision elsewhere. That is not a format or mechanism that my hon. Friends would support in principle.

As I have said, I am grateful for the contribution that the other place has made to the debate on this Bill. I am also grateful to my hon. Friends for their close scrutiny of some of the issues. Much progress has been made with the Bill during its passage and I hope that tonight we can make further progress with some of the amendments. As hon. Members will see with later amendments, the Government agree with some elements suggested in the other place. However, I cannot support amendment No. 6, nor can the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations or, dare I say it, the CBI. I know that that will help to drag my hon. Friends en masse into the Lobby. However, that is an important contribution, because the CBI has to work with the people in the probation service. The Local Government Association does not support the amendment either.

I hope that the lack of support from those three organisations and the consideration that we have given the Bill today will persuade the House to reject the amendment. I hope that my hon. Friends will agree that the Bill provides the possibility of determined commissioning at a national, regional and local level, in the interests of the probation service and offenders, with the objective of reducing crime.

Mr. Garnier: I agree with the Minister that the Bill was considerably improved in the other place. I agree with the Attorney-General, when she said:

> "The Bill has a joint purpose: to improve the supervision of offenders and better to protect victims. I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Ramsbotham, that what all have done in this House has been to that end. As the Bill moves back to the other place, we wish it God's speed."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 July 2007; Vol. 694, c. 25.]

I also agree with the Minister when he says that the motives of both Houses have been of the highest. Unusually for such a contentious Bill, party political argument has been mostly absent, and we have had some good arguments on it. We have had some rigorous and intellectual debates about the Bill's motives, and I hope that will continue this afternoon.

That said, I shall now move away from that consensual spirit by telling the Minister that he should not describe the amendment as an Opposition amendment. We are seeking to defend an all-party and no-party set of amendments that were introduced in the other place. If he looks at the debate in the other place, especially on this amendment, he will find that Conservative peers—he quoted Baroness Anelay—Liberal Democrat peers, Cross-Bench peers and Labour peers went into the Lobby against the Government. The Minister is therefore seeking to overturn amendments that had all-party and no-party support in the other place. To reduce the argument to Government versus Opposition is to make a false point and devalue his arguments for resisting the amendments.

I would explain the essential difference between the Minister and me by saying that the Opposition do not want probation services to be micro-managed from the top down—from the office of the Secretary of State for Justice. I should note in passing that, when the Bill began its life in this House before Christmas, we were of course talking about the Home Secretary.

The hon. Members for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) and for Selby (Mr. Grogan) might advance some collateral but different arguments, but we believe that, in certain circumstances, supervisory services could properly be contracted out to the third sector—charities, church groups and not-for-profit enterprises—and commercial enterprises.

Mr. Hanson: Given what the hon. and learned Gentleman has just said, why would Stephen Bubb of the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations say:

> "We do not believe that the amendments discussed in the Lords to clause 3...would provide the catalyst needed to increase the role of the third sector"?

Mr. Garnier: I shall deal with that question head on. It is not surprising that an organisation such as ACEVO, which represents some of the country's biggest charitable organisations in this field—or that the CBI, which represents some of the biggest companies in the country—should prefer the convenience of bilateral relations with the Secretary of State for Justice or one of his subordinates. That subordinate could be the chief executive of the National Offender Management Service, or it could be one of her subordinates—namely, a regional offender manager who is directly responsible, up the chain of command, to the Secretary of State.

Such a system would be preferable for the organisations that I have mentioned, because they would not have to go through what they regard as the expensive administrative inconvenience of having to deal with the more than 40 probation trusts that will come into existence under this Bill, or what are now known as probation boards. I can understand that. If I ran an organisation such as Turning Point or one of the other grant farmers—and I use the expression in a descriptive rather than pejorative way—that operate in the field, I would find it altogether more convenient to deal with the smallest possible number of contracting partners.

I received a fairly apoplectic letter from Mr. Bubb during the Bill's Report stage in this House, and a rather less apoplectic one the other day. The latter was addressed to "Dear Edward", and it was couched in identical terms to letters that were sent to every other Member of Parliament. I suspect that each letter addressed its recipient by his or her first name, but Mr. Bubb is employed to advance ACEVO's interests and I do not criticise him for that. However, I am employed by my constituents and the public as a whole to try to produce the best possible legislation, and to ensure that it best suits the purpose of improving the supervision of offenders and protecting victims. To be

[Mr. Garnier]

honest, the Minister's arguments contain nothing that supports the contention made by the Attorney-General in the other place that the Bill is designed to achieve those aims. The Government's objective in seeking to overturn the amendments is fairly straightforward: they want to concentrate the power of contracting into a few, centrally located hands.

I debated these matters at a meeting of the Local Government Association not long ago with the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), when he was Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Justice. He said, quite candidly, that the line of responsibility of a regional offender manager would not be to the local community, or to the local probation board or trust. Instead, the chain of command would go up the line and back to Whitehall: it used to be to Peel house and the Home Secretary, although it is now to Selbourne house and the Secretary of State for Justice. Unless the Government understand why there is so much cross-party objection to the model, the argument will go on for quite some time. It may or may not be a dialogue of the deaf.

5.15 pm

The Minister must understand that there is a need for, and a genuine purpose in having, commissioning at a local level. For goodness' sake, most crime is committed locally. Yes, I fully understand that there is a problem with international, cross-border and cross-regional crime. However, most of the work that is done in the Crown courts—I declare an interest as a Crown court recorder who occasionally has to read probation officers' pre-sentencing reports and has to seek the advice of such people when considering sentences—and certainly most of the work that is done in the magistrates courts is locally derived.

It therefore seems to us that the best response to local crime, in terms of community sentences and what is required in the supervision of offenders—both offenders on community sentences and those who have been released from custody—is one that is derived locally. The local judiciary, local councillors, the local magistracy, local probation officers and staff, and all the other interlinking agencies, such as social services, education authorities and others—all of whom have a common interest in reducing offending in the local area and supervising offenders in the most effective way—are the best reservoir of information and knowledge about how to organise things. No matter how good the motives of the Secretary of State or the chief executive of the National Offender Management Service and her regional offender managers, that is putting the cart before the horse. I urge the Government to think carefully about how they wish to take this matter forward.

If one reads the letter sent by the Secretary of State for Justice to me and no doubt others in the House, one can see evidence of the constant desire to pull things back into Whitehall and to control. I am sure that the Minister will have cast an eye over the letter before it was sent out from his Ministry. The Secretary of State writes:

"The aim of the Bill is to improve the delivery of probation services so as to reduce re-offending and better protect the public."

That is not controversial. The letter continues:

"To achieve this, the Bill removes the exclusive existing role for local probation boards, and establishes probation trusts as the public sector providers with whom the Secretary of State may contract. Regional Offender Managers...acting on behalf of the Secretary of State, will commission services."

So even in the third paragraph of the letter, we can see the direction of travel.

The letter continues:

"Commissioning will be an activity taking place at national, regional and local levels. Instead of the current situation, where 42 probation boards are managed directly from the centre, local lead providers will work under contract to ROMs for the delivery of services in a probation area."

So we are going to have members of ACEVO and the CBI coming to deals with the ROM about how best to carve up the national cake. The matter will be dealt with at a regional or national level and any crumbs that fall off the edge of the regional or national table and which ACEVO or the CBI do not want will be allowed to be picked up by the smaller fry, who will be permitted to have their share.

The letter goes on:

"The lead provider will concentrate on the delivery of offender management, while sub-contracting much of their interventions work to other providers based on what is most effective, and who is best placed to deliver, in their local community."

I pause there to comment that the person who is going to decide who is best placed to deliver is not somebody who is based locally, but the Secretary of State, via his subordinates. He will look from on high with his telescope at the worker bees getting on with such work as he condescends to give them, whereas I would rather the worker bees contracted directly locally, taking into account what is relevant and works in particular constituencies.

The letter continues:

"Where interventions can be delivered more effectively across a region, ROMs will contract directly with providers, but this will be so as to complement, not replace, the local arrangements."

Hon. Members can believe that if they will. Later on in the letter, the Secretary of State mentions accountability and local links, and says that he wants

"to use the powers in the Bill to devolve power to the local level. In particular, we will strengthen the existing local and regional arrangements for reducing re-offending across a range of partner organisations."

Well, guess where those organisations will come from. The letter continues:

"We have demonstrated this on the face of the Bill by amending it to ensure that the duties to agree, and have regard to, Local Area Agreements transfer from the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, along with the commensurate duties to co-operate with the relevant local authority overview and scrutiny committees. The boards of probation trusts are now required to include a local authority councillor"—

this is an interesting point—

"where practicable."

Guess who will decide when it is practicable for a local authority representative to become involved: it will be the regional offender managers, the chief executive officer of the National Offender Management Service, the Secretary of State, or even the Minister. We can see that the whole philosophy behind the Secretary of

State's argument is to pretend to give with one hand, but actually to control and to retain with both hands, so I look on what the Government propose with the greatest scepticism.

Owing to time constraints, I will not argue in support of the points that Members in the other place made in favour of their amendments, which I seek to retain in the Bill. Those of us who are interested in the subject will have read with care the arguments of my noble Friend Baroness Anelay, the noble Lord Ramsbotham, and Liberal Democrat, Labour and Cross-Bench Members in the other place in support of the arrangements that I wish to see retained in the Bill. The Minister will have studied them, but clearly he was not persuaded by them. However, I urge hon. Members to be persuaded by them, first, because those arrangements are right; secondly, because they will work better; and, thirdly, because, ironically, I suspect that they fit better with the ideas and philosophies of the Labour party. They would enable us to do better what the Attorney-General asked us to do: to improve the supervision of offenders, and better to protect victims. With those words, I urge the House to sustain the amendments introduced in the other place, which come under the heading of commissioning by probation boards and probation trusts.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): I want to speak to Lords amendment No. 6, on the key issue of who does the commissioning, and at what level commissioning takes place. Throughout our consideration of the Bill, I have been concerned to ensure that we do not destroy the good work done by the probation service and the probation boards. The key probation tasks should still be carried out locally, and should be determined at that level through local partnerships. In the early part of our debates on the Bill, much of the focus was on the issue of contestability and where that was taking us. Some of my colleagues on the Labour Benches and I were extremely concerned that there appeared to be an agenda of privatisation which was driving the Bill.

In addition, there is the idea of allowing much more commissioning that involves the voluntary sector. I want to make it clear—I have had to make it clear several times—that I do not oppose the involvement of the voluntary sector in probation work, where appropriate, but when people pray in aid bodies such as the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations and the CBI we have to take it with a pinch of salt. The issue is not just one of convenience, which the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) talked about; a not-for-profit organisation is not above empire building, and I am sure that we have all seen plenty of examples of that. Organisations do not approach the issue as outsiders with a neutral, objective point of view. They have considerable vested interests in what happens—a financial interest if it is a private company, or empire building in the case of a voluntary organisation.

I accept that, as the Minister said, some commissioning is best done at national or regional level. I see examples where that is clearly the case, such as hostel provision, which is performed at a national level now. If the hostel is to accommodate sex offenders, it should not be in the locality where the sex offenders come from and where they may bump into their victims in the street. I can see other examples where economies of scale suggest commissioning at national or regional level. Electronic tagging is an obvious case where that makes sense, as only one or two companies provide the service. We do not want 40 probation areas to end up with 40 different contracts.

I entirely understand the Minister's argument. I accept what has been said in the past few days. In the letter that he knows was sent by his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to me and other hon. Members, there has been a significant shift in the Government's approach. The Secretary of State writes that he sees commissioning at national level of some very specialist low volume, high cost services—hostels would be an example—and that the regional commissioners will take strategic overviews for their areas but will work in partnership with local authorities, the National Treatment Agency, learning and skills councils and so on.

The most important thing that the Secretary of State said was about local provision. The lead provider, which in general will be the probation board or trust, certainly to start with, will act as both provider and commissioner and will concentrate on delivering the core offender management work. An equally important assurance that he gave in the letter, which my right hon. Friend the Minister repeated, was that provided its performance meets requirements, the lead provider in a probation area will be the probation trust. The lead provider will engage with other partners in the local strategic partnership to agree and implement local area agreements.

Mr. Garnier: But is the hon. Gentleman as concerned as I am that that arrangement is not on the face of the Bill?

Mr. Gerrard: I am coming to that. The letter is significant. It represents real movement from the Government's position some time ago. On Third Reading the then Home Secretary said of local area agreements and partnerships:

> "At the moment, one of those partners is the present probation board, which is both a commissioner and a provider. That will change and the commissioner element of that will go to the regional commissioner."—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2007; Vol. 457, c. 1023.]

Clearly, on Third Reading it was intended that the local probation trust would not be a commissioner. I accept that there has been a significant shift, and that the present Secretary of State says that the local probation trust will be both provider and commissioner and will take the lead in local commissioning.

My concern, which others raised earlier, is that that is not on the face of the Bill. Will the Minister think again? The Bill, with amendments, will obviously go back to the other place. Will he consider putting on the face of the Bill what has been said—that the lead provider and commissioner will be the local probation trust, and that the Secretary of State will, rightly, have the power to step in when what is done locally is not satisfactory? Poor quality service should not be allowed to continue, so the power for the Secretary of State to step in is needed. If that was in the Bill, someone could, if necessary, challenge that intervention, perhaps by judicial review.

5.30 pm

I very much welcome the Secretary of State's letter, because it gets us, if not to where we want to be—there are still elements of the Bill that cause me considerable

concern—then much closer to where we want to be than where we were, certainly on Second Reading. I am still worried about the bureaucracy that will be involved in the regional structures. I am still not clear about who makes the decisions on commissioning. The Bill originally said that it would be the Secretary of State, the amendment suggests probation trusts, and Ministers are saying that we will have to have both. In fact, there are three possibilities—the Secretary of State, the regional offender manager, or the local trust working at different levels, with the focus on the local, which is where it should be. The question is who decides what is commissioned at the regional level and at the local level. I want the emphasis to be with the local—with the probation trust—not with the regional offender manager.

Patrick Hall: My hon. Friend is talking about one of my key concerns. What we have heard from the Minister today has taken us a lot further forward. I think that the Government have now accepted that some of the very good local, finely tuned work, which often deals with only small groups of people but is none the less an essential part of effective probation and offender management, is secure and will continue. Does he agree that that is an extremely important advance?

Mr. Gerrard: That is right. It very much fits in with what was being said last week in the annual report from the chief inspector of probation services, who said that incremental improvements had been made and that we need to continue that process instead of throwing the whole structure up in the air. What Ministers have said in the last day or so is moving in the right direction. The current situation is not perfect, but there has been an important shift in what is being said, which is very different from what was said on Third Reading. I wish that we had been in the position of having this productive discussion around the time of Report and Third Reading, when we could have been much nearer to getting to where we should be.

Given what the Minister said, I am not going to oppose what the Government are doing, although that does not mean to say that I will necessarily vote for it. I hope that if this is discussed again in the other place we will get into the Bill exactly the sort of things that Ministers have been saying and that the Secretary of State said to me in his letter.

Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): I do not intend to detain the House at great length, but I want to say a few words, given that we are having the crucial part of our discussion right at the beginning.

Nobody can doubt the important role played by probation services. There is a churning of people who regularly commit crimes against our constituents, and breaking that cycle is an absolutely crucial public policy objective of the Government and is in the interests of everybody in this country. I ought to say straight away that my party has no innate hostility to diversity of provision—far from it. The voluntary sector is currently involved in providing probationary services in some circumstances, but our objection to the Bill and the Government's intentions is that we do not wish to see legislation starting from a top-down, prescriptive assumption that is driven by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State will be responsible for commissioning services either directly or through his agents—the extraordinarily named regional offender managers. That gives us a sense of the tone and style of this arrangement; people with such overbearing and rather grand titles will impose their blueprint on those who serve at a more local level, which gets to the crux of our frustrations and our problem with the Government's position.

As we are in the business of citing organisations in our support, the Probation Boards Association emphasised recently that crime is a local phenomenon with local causes and solutions. That is very much my experience. I represent a sizeable county town in the largely rural county of Somerset, and doubtless it has problems that are familiar to different communities throughout the country, but specific problems may not be replicated in quite the same way in, for example, the constituency of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard), who represents a part of our capital city.

We need probation services that are finely attuned to the individual needs and requirements of each community, and an approach driven from the top down by the Secretary of State with his regional enforcers seems unlikely to achieve that desired objective. We are looking, in microcosm, at the wider problem with the Government's attitude to public services. Perhaps it is a hangover from the previous Prime Minister, Tony Blair—

Mr. David Anderson: Who?

Mr. Browne: It is an opportunity to say his name on the Floor of the House.

Perhaps the measure is a legacy of Tony Blair's approach to public service reform, where the language was modernising and high on rhetoric, but in practice we often dealt with a controlled and restrictive blueprint.

Mr. Garnier: The reality of the previous Prime Minister's Government was reflected by the fact that in the winter estimates, it became apparent that the headquarters of the National Offender Management Service was to receive £60 million to £80 million more than the entire front line of the probation service. We can see what the Government are in the business of doing. They are pulling not just power into the centre, but money with it.

Mr. Browne: I am grateful for that intervention because it further reinforces my point. In essence, the critique is this: the Government are persuaded intellectually of the need to improve public services through the devolution of power and authority, to allow a thousand flowers to bloom and to empower local communities, but they are instinctively incapable of turning such rhetoric into practice. They talk the language of freedom, but they practise the actions of control. That is our objection to the Government's proposals, and for that reason I shall not back down, as some Labour MPs have said that they are inclined to. My party will vote to frustrate the Government's objective.

Patrick Hall: On Report and Third Reading—perhaps a little late in the day—the Government began to listen—thanks to the personal interest that the then Home Secretary took in the matters that we are considering. Significant movement occurred, albeit somewhat late in the day, on contestability.

The Government made a commitment to exclude the core probation services for three years from contestability, which covers report writing, supervision of serious offenders and breached proceedings. We were promised that best value would be adopted as the test of whether a contested service would be successful. The dogmatic adherence to a target budget percentage method of allocating money—that is, outsourcing 5, 10 or 20 per cent.—was abandoned. We were also promised that any changes to those matters in three or more years would be based on evidence of what was happening on the ground. The then Home Secretary undertook to ensure that the Government would establish a mechanism to learn what was happening on the ground so that future decisions would be based on evidence.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister said, the other place has made welcome movement, some of which the Government will accept. Improvements have therefore been made there. Today the Minister put it on record that in practice, commissioning probation services will take place not only from a centrally driven, Secretary of State position or nationally, but regionally—as knew earlier—and, most significantly, locally. That means probation boards and trusts. That tackles a concern that has been expressed not only by hon. Members but by people who work in the probation services throughout the country—certainly in Bedfordshire, where I have listened to people.

It is vital to keep as much commissioning as is appropriate local. That is especially important in the context of a revived local area agreement mechanism, which the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill introduces. Under earlier proposals in the Bill that we are considering, the chief probation officer would have been the only statutory partner in the local area agreement who was unable to agree to the delivery of services that the local area agreement partners wanted. Under those proposals, the chief probation officer was not in command of a budget. However, now that my colleagues in the Government have made an important clarification, the chief probation officer can say that the probation trust or board will contribute—including resources, when necessary—to the local area agreement. That is a significant improvement.

Local commissioning is important because it is based on local knowledge. Local people should make those judgments and determinations, not a regional manager or the Secretary of State.

Mr. David Anderson: My hon. Friend mentioned resources as well as the power to commission. We must have the financial resources. It is clear from a recent report from the chief inspector of probation that resources are not keeping pace with demand. Does my hon. Friend believe that that needs to be sorted out before we move forward?

Patrick Hall: That would be helpful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) said, we would like more of an incremental approach to the way in which those matters evolve. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) would fit in with that.

Local knowledge is important. When people know each other and have built up professional relationships of trust over several years, they can fine-tune the services that they agree to provide, often for one or two individuals. That may not appear significant on a national scale, but it makes a difference to our constituents. As we all know, much of the crime that takes place in this country is perpetrated by a handful of individuals, who are known to the authorities. It is a handful of people who need particular attention. We therefore have to work with those in a local area who deal with them. That is an important point, which the Government have rightly agreed to secure.

5.45 pm

Securing the continuation of that will make all the difference to improving offender management. However, I have taken some time and trouble to listen to people working in the probation service in Bedfordshire on the issue, and I have not met anyone who is trying to defend something without any change, or who does not concede that improvements are needed. Indeed, many are committed to continuing to make improvements. However, they saw that that process would be blocked if commissioning at a local level were no longer to take place, because neither the Secretary of State nor the regional offender manager is in a position to have that local knowledge. I therefore sincerely welcome the words, carefully used, of my right hon. Friend the Minister in opening this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow said that he would certainly not vote against the Government's position, but I urge him to vote for it, because we have seen a significant improvement, which is about the best we are going to get. The alternative position, put forward in the Lords—mainly by the Conservatives, but it was perhaps supported by some others—would be to exclude the possibility of regional and national commissioning. That is a dogmatic approach. Not everything needed to improve offender management can be delivered only at local level, even if, in my view, much or most of it can. We need to make the best use of the national expertise, often specialist, which is available by definition on a national and possibly regional basis.

Mr. Grogan: Does my hon. Friend not agree that it would be so much better, with the talent that is available, if all the marvellous suggestions that the Government have made could be included in the Bill? Then everyone would be clear. If those suggestions are not included, is there not a danger that the Secretary of State will ultimately be responsible for all commissioning under the Bill, and that a future Secretary of State for Justice might not be nearly as well intentioned and reasonable as the current holder of that position?

Patrick Hall: I agree with much of what my hon. Friend has just said, especially as he is currently in such close proximity to the Secretary of State. I asked earlier about including some of those matters in the Bill, and in particular the structure of national, regional and local commissioning. We had an answer, on which I

[Patrick Hall]

might like to see some movement, but what is important, and what my hon. Friend should not forget, is that what a Secretary of State or a Minister says on the record in this House is very significant indeed.

Mr. Garnier: I am sure that what the hon. Gentleman says is right. Indeed, nowadays the courts can read what a Minister says, in doing their best to construe an Act of Parliament. He will remember, I hope, that about an hour and a half or so ago we were talking about the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill. The issue was whether the Government should include in that Bill the period in which the Prison Service and the police should be brought within the corporate manslaughter regime. The Government seemed to be hugely reluctant to do that. Unless such matters are in that Bill, there will always be a good reason not to do something. I earnestly urge the hon. Gentleman, with the greatest of diffidence, to apply his mind to his experience of what this Government—and indeed all Governments—do unless they are required to do something by the law of the land.

Patrick Hall: I am interested in what the hon. and learned Gentleman says, but in practice, how offender management will be delivered at the local level is so detailed and often so complex that it will be practically impossible for the Secretary of State to take over all those functions. In practice, we shall see the development of commissioning at national, regional and local levels, with the bulk of it at a local level. Yes, in theory, and perhaps in practice, I would prefer to see some words in the Bill to underpin that. However, what my right hon. Friend the Minister has said amounts to the same thing. He could not have stood before the House and made those comments unless the Government were completely committed to that approach. Frankly, I do not see any Government being able to deliver offender management and a good probation service unless much of the work is carried out at a local level. We are dealing with the practical realities of how legislation is dealt with in both Houses of Parliament.

For those reasons, I urge my hon. Friends who are considering abstaining to demonstrate their support for how the Government have listened and moved on these issues. It is also important to send a signal to the other place by supporting the Government's position this afternoon.

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friends, and Opposition Members, for the constructive tone of this afternoon's debate. First, I would like to say to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) and the hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Browne) that the debate goes to the heart of how we see the new probation service progressing. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough believes that it will concentrate power in the hands of the Secretary of State, but I believe that it will share power between the Secretary of State, regional offender managers and local probation trusts. I can give him the assurance, which I hope will help him to join us in the Lobby this evening, that it will be for the lead provider to decide—based on local knowledge at the local level—what commissioning is necessary and what form it will take.

Certainly, the Secretary of State will need to commission some things and regional offender managers will need to commission other things at regional level. I referred in my opening remarks to the efficient scale of services at regional and national levels. As I say, certain things will need to be commissioned at those levels, but other areas of work could be undertaken at the local level. It is important to get the balance right, but it is certainly our intention that the local lead provider should undertake the relevant commissioning. That is the difference between the hon. and learned Member for Harborough and myself, and between the hon. Member for Taunton and myself, but I hope that we will not need to divide the House on that basis.

My hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) and for Bedford (Patrick Hall) made a number of important points. I am very pleased that they have accepted the spirit of what I said in my opening remarks. I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow says about building my remarks and their context properly into the Bill. I will look further into the possibility of doing that, but I need to reflect in greater detail. I have tried to assure my hon. Friend that the approach of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and myself—what we have said both publicly and privately, in writing to my hon. Friend—provides the opportunity for us to reflect seriously about doing that. I will definitely look further into it.

Mr. Garnier: How long is this period of reflection likely to be?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. and learned Gentleman will know that if, as I expect, the House rejects the Lords amendments today, they will go back to another place. Another place will have to reconsider them shortly. I am not a business manager, but I am sure that that will be done shortly. I will have further discussions with my right hon. Friend and parliamentary counsel about these serious matters. We need to get this right; it is not a matter of simply expressing an aspiration. Parliamentary counsel put legislative intention into effect. My right hon. Friend and I will give further consideration to the possibility of looking further into these matters and putting them on the face of the Bill.

I hope that after that assurance, my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow and for Bedford will be able to help the Government by supporting us in the Lobby and rejecting the amendments. As I said in my opening remarks, whether the amendments come from the Conservatives or have cross-party support, they will damage the principles of the Bill. Those principles are to improve the level of probation services, to make a difference on the ground, to prevent reoffending and to ensure that we build a better society by helping people who have been offenders. We need not just to help probation boards or trusts in the future, but to involve the voluntary sector in providing effective services.

I very much appreciate the tone of the debate, and I urge my hon. Friends to support the Government, in view of what I have said about the possibility of putting such matters into the Bill.

Question put, That the House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 169.

Division No. 193] **[5.55 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek

Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Claire Ward and
Mr. Bob Blizzard

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Mr. David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Fox, Dr. Liam
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Herbert, Nick
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Opik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paisley, rh Rev. Ian
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Yeo, Mr. Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Crispin Blunt and
Mr. Richard Benyon

Question accordingly agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I now have to announce the result of a deferred Division on the Question relating to political parties. The Ayes were 295, the Noes were 141, so the motion was agreed to.

[The Division List is published at the end of today's debates.]

Offender Management Bill

Clause 12

POWER TO REPEAL SECTION 4

Lords amendment: No. 22.

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 23 and the Government motion to disagree thereto, and Lords amendment No. 38 and the Government motion to disagree thereto.

Mr. Hanson: The Lords amendments apply two novel parliamentary processes to two different aspects of the Bill. First, Lords amendment No. 22 proposes that the so-called super-affirmative procedure be applied to the power in clause 12 to repeal the restriction on work involving the courts in clause 4. Many hon. Members expressed concerns at an earlier stage about the pace of change in the Bill. We listened carefully to those concerns and have done two things in response. First, we gave a clear commitment that core offender management work—the management and supervision of individual cases—will be commissioned only from the public sector for three years, or until 2010. Secondly, we amended the Bill to ensure that the work that probation services do in relation to courts can be commissioned only from the public sector until both Houses of Parliament agree that the restriction may be lifted. The Government agree that the power to lift the restriction should be subject to the affirmative procedure.

As hon. Members will know, the Lords have taken a different view, and have subsequently amended the Bill to apply the super-affirmative procedure to the matter. Their amendment seeks to impose a delay on the procedure by specifying that a draft order must be laid for at least 60 days before both Houses may debate it. It seeks to impose requirements on both Houses by obliging them to approve a report that sets out what will be in the draft order. Both Houses would then be required to approve the proposals in the same Session, as set out in the order. I accept that the Lords have taken a view on the matter, but such a novel procedure is completely disproportionate to the change proposed by the Bill.

The affirmative procedure is well known by hon. Members. It is tried and tested, and I believe that it provides the appropriate level of scrutiny for the power that we have introduced. The reasons that the amendment requires the Government to give would have to be given in any case, even with the normal affirmative procedure. We have to make our case, and under the affirmative procedure we have to back it up with evidence to secure the support of Parliament. The affirmative procedure offers the Commons a clear, operational opportunity to give a view on those issues. The super-affirmative procedure is disproportionate, so I urge the House to reject the amendment.

Secondly, Lords amendments Nos. 23 and 38, too, seek to apply what I can only term "novel procedures" to the implementation of part 1 as a whole. Under those amendments, the Government would be required to lay before both Houses of Parliament a report containing a review of the proposals set out by my noble Friend Lord Carter in his report of December 2003, as well as the responses to—and a review of—the Government consultation document of October 2005, and a review of the proposals generally.

6.15 pm

Having examined the amendments in some detail, I am not entirely sure what they are intended to achieve. I am interpreting here, but I believe that their supporters in another place believe that the Government might have time to re-examine documents that are two years old, or nearly four years old, and that having done so and having completed a long and, in part, tortuous parliamentary process, they might not agree to implement the proposals after all. I do not consider that realistic. If we were to revisit those dated documents, we would merely see how far the policy had progressed and how many amendments had been made, thanks to consideration in another place and by my hon. Friends and the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier).

The policy before the House today is not the same as the policy set out in my noble Friend Lord Carter's report in December 2003. It is not the same as the policy in the response to the October 2005 consultation document, and it is not the same as the policy contained in proposals made as recently as earlier this year. I believe that, both in legislative terms and in our planning for implementation, we have listened to Parliament, listened to stakeholders, and made some significant changes. I therefore hope that the House will reject Lords amendments Nos. 23 and 38.

The machinery of government changed on 9 May when the Ministry of Justice was formed. There may now be an opportunity for another place to conclude that its formation has made significant changes to the Government's commitment to the Bill. I have set out clearly today how the Government envisage the commissioning process. I believe that the process described in the Bill is one that we can support, given what was said earlier by my hon. Friends, who have now left the Chamber and gone for a well-earned cup of tea. We need to concentrate on the way forward, and to end delay and uncertainty. For those reasons and those reasons alone, I urge the House to reject the amendments.

Mr. Garnier: I support the Lords amendments. Although I listened carefully to the Minister's arguments on behalf of the Government, I think that they require rather more analysis than he was able to give.

When the Minister came to my constituency to address the Leicestershire and Rutland probation service at Leicester race course, than which there is no finer place, he did not exactly run away with himself. He was not exactly carried away with enthusiasm for the project over which he now has control, namely the National Offender Management Service. In the course of his remarks, of which someone kindly sent me a note—

Mr. Hanson: The hon. and learned Gentleman has spies.

Mr. Garnier: I have a constituent.

In the course of his remarks to the Leicestershire and Rutland probation service, the Minister admitted that the probation service in my county was one of the best. It is probably in the top four, and it may well be the best of all in terms of hitting the targets that the Government have set it. It is therefore highly likely to be one of the first to be required to divert much of its attention, time and money to changing from a board to a trust.

Mr. Hanson *rose—*

Mr. Garnier: Does the Minister wish to praise the probation service even further?

Mr. Hanson: Not only to praise it, but to say that the chairman and chief executive look forward very much to the opportunity to apply for trust status.

Mr. Garnier: Is it not interesting that they say such things to people they talk to? I dare say that if I were employed by the Secretary of State for Justice, I should find it convenient to look forward to all his plans, not least because I might hope they would include me.

But let me return to Leicester race course, where there is a very fine straight mile. The Minister rightly praised the Leicestershire and Rutland probation service and also said that the creation of NOMS—that bureaucratic blancmange placed between the Secretary of State and the Prison Service and the probation service—had not quite turned out as he wished. I paraphrase what was said, of course, and I do not have to be careful about what I say as I am not a NOMS employee.

It is fair to say that most dispassionate observers of the creation of NOMS will have wondered why so much money was spent and what it was designed to achieve, and also why it was necessary to draw people from the Prison Service, the probation service and other limbs of the Home Office and other Departments and to push them all into the NOMS headquarters. For instance, why were all the regional offender managers put into post? I believe that there are now about 2,000 new civil servants working for NOMS. What benefits have accrued both to the public in terms of reducing reoffending and enhancing public protection and to the Prison Service and probation service? I acknowledge that these are still early days as we are only in the third financial year of NOMS, but it is difficult to discern any benefit that the public or public services have gained from the change. Its creation did not require legislation, but it is sometimes referred to in legislation, and the Minister found it difficult to praise it wholeheartedly when he visited my constituency.

I have provided some background, and I now wish to discuss how we got to where we are. This is not the first Offender Management Bill. Another one was introduced before the 2005 general election, which the election prevented from being enacted. The pre-2005 Bill came out of a report referred to in amendment No. 23, which was published on 11 December 2003: "Managing Offenders, Reducing Crime: A New Approach". That led not only to the creation of the pre-2005 Bill, but to the collation of responses to the consultation document "Restructuring Probation to Reduce Re-Offending", which anteceded the 2007 Bill.

We and the House of Lords suggest that those two reports and the review of the responses to the second report should at least be publicly understood, and discussed and digested by the Government, before the Bill is enacted. We do not seek to kill off the Bill; if we had wanted to do that we would have attempted to do so on Second Reading, when we gave it conditional support—although our hopes were disappointed by the time we reached Third Reading. We want to produce the best Bill in order to do what the Attorney-General asked us to do: to reduce reoffending and increase public protection.

On 6 January 2004, the Government published "Reducing Crime, Changing Lives" in response to Lord Carter's report "Managing Offenders, Reducing Crime: A New Approach". It proposed to merge the prison and probation services and to open up work with offenders to both internal and external markets. It also set up NOMS, with its national and regional structures.

Interestingly enough, on 20 July 2004 the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Paul Goggins), who is one of the many Labour Members of Parliament who have become Ministers in the past 10 years—*[Interruption.]* He swapped jobs with the Minister—what a treat for everybody. Anyway, on 20 July the hon. Gentleman, when he was Under-Secretary with responsibility for correctional services, announced that the Government had decided that their original proposal for the immediate establishment of NOMS regional boards and the separation of probation staff into offender management and interventions needed more time. He said he had decided that the option of moving immediately to create new regional boards was unlikely to deliver better management of offenders and better services—his main two objectives. He also said that he wanted to concentrate on delivering end-to-end offender management and that he would introduce greater competition, because he had concluded that those objectives could best be achieved through 42 probation boards. How times have changed.

In 2005, the Management of Offenders and Sentencing Bill was introduced in the other place, which would have abolished the probation service and introduced a fragmented market. By this time, the notion of merging prisons and probation appears to have been forgotten. However, the Bill did not proceed, partly because of an unexpected and strong opposition to its proposals in the other place and because of the intervention of the 2005 general election.

Ever wishing to consult, the Government issued yet a further consultation paper, as mentioned in amendment No. 23. It was called "Restructuring Probation to Reduce Re-Offending" and it was published in October 2005. That led to much discussion, and some response from those interested in the subject. By the end of the consultation period, on 20 December 2005, we had learned that of the 748 people and organisations that had responded, only 10 were in favour of the Government's proposals. Despite that overwhelming rejection of the restructuring ideas, the Government have pressed ahead with the Bill, which had its Second Reading just before Christmas 2006.

The Government's view at that stage—it changes from time to time as they are a flexible collection of people—was that the changes were required because too many offences were being committed, reoffending rates were far too high, the performance of the probation service was poor, and matters needed a good shake up—never mind the fact that it would be the third shake up since 2000. If one keeps shaking things, they tend to break, but here we are, watching the Government shake it up a bit more.

Our complaint, which we share with the other place, is that the Government's decision to introduce the Bill in its present form is not evidence-based. It ignores the responses to the consultation exercise; it promotes consequences that are foreseeable, but which do not appear to have been foreseen by the Government; it transfers commissioning powers away from local areas and into the hands of NOMS and therefore into the control of the Secretary of State, as mentioned in the debate we had earlier today; it reduces ministerial accountability; it undermines much of the probation service's ability to do its work; it may compromise training standards, although we may have a chance to discuss that point later this evening; and it may undermine the concept of a probation profession, a point that was made by Labour Members earlier.

All those arguments are worth restating, because the Government are not sure of what they are about. This is the third restructuring of the probation service since 2000, but they have not prepared an adequate business case to justify their proposals, nor produced any evidence that the restructuring will reduce offending or increase public protection.

6.30 pm

Moreover, the Opposition have managed to discover that the proposals will be hugely expensive. I mentioned, in a recent intervention on the hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Browne), that NOMS has a budget that is about £60 million or £80 million bigger than that granted to the front line of the probation service. The Government are spending hundreds of millions of pounds on chairs, desks and filing cabinets for the NOMS headquarters, and on moving no doubt highly qualified officials from the prison and probation services and the Home Office to an office in Whitehall where they wonder what they are supposed to do. We believe that that money would be better spent on probation officers, and on supervisory provision through the private and charitable sectors.

The Government might need the delay and time for consideration that the amendments would provide to ensure that the legislation produced is not muddled. I urge the House, or at least, as much of it that is here—

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): We are right behind you.

Mr. Garnier: I thought so: all young, brave officers say, "Charge, men, I'm right behind you!" I hope that all hon. Members will take this opportunity to think carefully about what they are doing.

Amendment No. 22 would make the Government and the Secretary of State more accountable. The Bill gives the Secretary of State huge powers to amend the law by secondary legislation. The question of whether the Secretary of State should use the affirmative or the negative procedure to change the law has been debated, and the Minister of State said in a letter of 17 July that the Government accept that some parliamentary scrutiny "would be appropriate". That is very nice of him, but he proposes that it should take the form of the negative rather than the affirmative procedure. I had hoped for rather more than that.

If the Bill is to make progress, the Government should accept the procedure set out in amendment No. 22, which proposes what is known colloquially as the super-affirmative procedure. The proposed system is logical and clear, and would lead to far greater parliamentary scrutiny, with the result that the Secretary of State would be rendered more accountable to both Houses of Parliament. No democrat who is a member of the Executive should complain about that.

We face one constitutional problem that some people—and, from time to time, I am one of them—say is a benefit. It is that the Executive not only sit in Parliament, but on it as well. The amendment goes some way towards redressing the balance. If we can get the Government to ensure that their measures are "superly" affirmed, the result may be that the Executive are required to look Parliament more directly in the face.

Amendment No. 38 deals with the date of implementation. It may not be known by many in the Chamber that the implementation provision is to be found on the last page of the main body of the Bill, in clause 38. The provision permits the Secretary of State to designate an appointed day for the Bill to come into force. Amendment No. 38 would mean that the appointed day would be provisional on the factors referred to in subsections (1A) and (1B) in the amendment. Those seem entirely sensible and logical matters to take into account. *[Interruption.]* I am informed that the Government are so concerned about the super-affirmative procedure that they would like to speak at some length on the subject. I would be delighted if the right hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton, West (Mr. McAvoy), who is concerned about my well-being, could have that opportunity, but sadly he is part of the silent service, so we have merely to stand here and admire him in every possible way. Unfortunately, the argument that he has put to me politely on paper does not move me at all and, in due course, I will ask for the opinion of the House on the procedural matters in this group of amendments.

Mr. Jeremy Browne: It is fair to say that this group of amendments does not go as directly to the heart of the Bill as the previous group. None the less, they are significant and worthy of brief comment. I rise to highlight two objectives to which I hope we in this House attach importance.

First—everybody will obviously share this objective—we wish to have legislation that reduces the reoffending rate and that is able to deal effectively with the problems that affect all our constituents. To that end, it is important that Ministers properly digest all the relevant reports, that we take stock of informed contributions to the debate, and that we try to make the Government and all their agencies work as effectively as possible to try to deal with this significant problem. Apart from the desire to avoid inconvenience, I cannot

[Mr. Jeremy Browne]

see why Ministers would deeply object to trying to allow and accommodate serious attempts to improve efforts to reduce reoffending rates.

The second, related, objective of this place is to try to make sure that the legislation that we pass is effective and meets its own objectives. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) touched on the subject a moment ago. We have had several consultation papers on the subject and a number of attempts to restructure probation services. In fact, we have had so many changes that, when the Bill had its Second Reading in this House in December, it was sponsored by a completely different Department from the Department that now seeks to conclude the deliberations. We can say with some confidence that this is not a settled area of Government policy.

Given that that is the case, it seems reasonable that proper reflection should take place to make sure that the legislation is effective, that reoffending rates are tackled in the best way possible, and that the Secretary of State himself is held fully accountable. For all those reasons, my party is minded to reject the Government's position on this group of amendments and to support the hon. and learned Gentleman when he seeks to test the opinion of the House.

Mr. Hanson: With the leave of the House, I shall comment on the assertions made by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) on the performance of the National Offender Management Service. He mentioned comments that I made when I visited Leicester race course in his constituency. On that occasion, NOMS gave me a warm welcome, and in the years in which the service has been operational, there has been significant improvement to performance. Let me give him a couple of figures to ponder while he reflects on the progress of the Bill.

In 2005-06, the target was for 40,000 offenders to take part in the basic skills programme, and 44,972 offenders started the programme. The target for key work skills awards was 120,000 people, and 186,000 people achieved those awards. The target for enhanced community punishment unpaid work completion was 50,000, and over 51,000 individuals completed unpaid work. I am proud of the fact that the offender management service is delivering services, both in prison and in the community, and that it is achieving some of the targets that we have set, but we are not complacent, as was shown in our debate on the previous group of amendments. We want improvements, and we want to make sure that there are drivers to help underperforming probation services to improve.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough and the hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Browne) seemed to suggest that the Government had been in a mad rush to get the legislation through the House, but that "mad rush" goes back to my noble Friend Lord Carter's report in 2003, some four years ago. The amendments before us ask us to reconsider what Lord Carter said in 2003, and the issues considered in the consultation in 2005. Essentially, it asks us to revisit the Bill's progress through this place and the other place over that period, and to revisit our debates to date, just in case the Government decide that what they have sought to do so far is wrong and not applicable.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough will be aware that the deadline for expressing interest in forming part of the initial wave of probation trusts has passed. Twenty-two of the 35 probation boards eligible—nearly two thirds of them—expressed an interest in becoming probation trusts in the first wave. The probation boards that have expressed an interest in becoming trusts, including in his area of Leicestershire, would not welcome a further delay to the consideration of that policy objective. They have expressed an interest, and they want to consider going on to the next stage, and we are now progressing with that stage in depth. We have had discussions and there has been progress; the Government have not rushed the proposals. The Lords amendments seek to delay still further the impact of the legislation.

Mr. Garnier: I agree that the gap between 2000 and 2007 cannot be described as a short period, but of course we are not talking about a continuum. There has been a number of reviews, and a number of proposals put forward, and we are now dealing with the third reorganisation of the probation service in that relatively short period. It is no good saying, "We've been thinking about the subject for some time, so the process can't be described as a rush." If we examine and analyse what has happened in those seven years, we can see that the thinking process behind the Government's proposals has been, shall we say, a little disorganised. That is the complaint, and that is why it is so important that there be a delay period that allows the Government time to see how the measures will work in practice, before they bring the Bill into full effect.

Mr. Hanson: I accept what the hon. and learned Gentleman says, but I am not convinced that further delay to the process and further consideration would be valuable. My colleagues in NOMS and I will obviously take a keen interest in the roll-out of the waves of trust applications. We will take a keen interest in the development of NOMS at probation trust/board level, and we will monitor it carefully as a matter of course. I do not believe that the further delay proposed in the amendment would be of great assistance to the process, or that the super-affirmative procedure would add anything to parliamentary scrutiny that the affirmative procedure proposed in the Bill will not add. For those reasons, I regret that I must disappoint the hon. and learned Gentleman, much as I enjoyed visiting his constituency to discuss matters with his constituents. I urge the House to reject the amendment.

Question put, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 159.

Division No. 194] **[6.45 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Ainger, Nick	Battle, rh John
Allen, Mr. Graham	Beckett, rh Margaret
Anderson, Janet	Begg, Miss Anne
Atkins, Charlotte	Bell, Sir Stuart
Austin, Mr. Ian	Benn, rh Hilary
Austin, John	Benton, Mr. Joe
Bailey, Mr. Adrian	Berry, Roger
Baird, Vera	Betts, Mr. Clive
Balls, rh Ed	Blackman, Liz
Banks, Gordon	Blears, rh Hazel
Barlow, Ms Celia	Blunkett, rh Mr. David

Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Claire Ward and
Mr. Bob Blizzard

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Mr. David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul

Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Herbert, Nick
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, David
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paisley, rh Rev. Ian
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mr. Roger
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Yeo, Mr. Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Evennett and Mr. Richard Benyon

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment disagreed to.
Lords amendment: No. 11.

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 11.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The Minister must move the motion to disagree.

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with the Lords in the said amendment. However, I also beg to move Government amendment (a)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are considering Lords amendment No. 11 and the motion to disagree thereto. With this, we may discuss Government amendment (a) in lieu thereof. However, we do not move it at this stage.

7 pm

Mr. Hanson: I believe that I have fulfilled the requirements.

Members of another place expressed genuine anxiety about the risk of conflicts of interest if one organisation proposed and provided outcomes for offenders. They feared that advice might be skewed towards the outcomes that the organisation provided. Another place amended the Bill to require individual providers of probation services and their officers to ensure that their advice to courts and the Parole Board did not give rise to any conflict of interest.

I have carefully considered the points that were raised in another place together with concerns that were expressed here earlier. I now believe that it would be helpful to deal with the matter on the face of the Bill. I have a small quibble with the Lords amendment because it places a duty on individual providers and officers, whereas we believe that it would be appropriate to give the duty to the Secretary of State, who is better placed to take the appropriate steps to ensure that the conflict of interest does not arise.

I am grateful for the assistance of the other place in making the improvement and I hope that Government amendment (a) will help. I believe that we have tackled the spirit of the other place's concerns. I commend amendment (a) to hon. Members.

Mr. Garnier: The debate is less contentious than those that we have held so far. I am grateful to the Minister for accepting the thrust of the arguments in the other place and those that were drawn to his predecessor's attention in Committee. As a Member of Parliament and having declared my interest as a recorder, I raised our concerns about the conflict of interest that might arise if a provider of a probation service had an interest in the recommendation that he

or his organisation made to the sentencing court—be it the Crown court or a magistrates court. Clearly, some progress has been made, thanks to discussions in another place on conflict of interest.

I should like the Minister to explain in greater detail the difference between Government amendment (a) and the Lords amendment. They are similar in intention but there are significant differences of detail. The Lords amendment states:

"In carrying out their functions under this Part, and in particular in providing any assistance to the courts and to the Parole Board for England and Wales, providers of probation services and their officers shall ensure that such assistance does not give rise to any conflict of interest".

Let us leave aside for the moment the argument about whether the Secretary of State or the provider of probation services is the appropriate person to fulfil the requirement. If I got into that, I would repeat the arguments about the top-down delivery of probation services and so on, and I do not want to do that. However, there is a difference between whoever keeps an eye on the risk of conflict "ensuring" that it does not occur and his—as is suggested in Government amendment (a)—having

"regard to the need to take reasonable steps to avoid"

conflict. That is a very long-winded way of saying, "we'll do our best." I prefer the Secretary of State to be placed under an obligation that he should ensure that there is, so far as practicable, no risk of a conflict. The issue might have to go back to the other place. If so, between now and then, I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman consider the difference between "ensure" and

"have regard to the need to take reasonable steps to avoid (so far as practicable)".

If he can persuade himself that it would be better to insert "ensure" rather than the alternative, we would be completely ad idem, as opposed to just wishing to travel down the same path.

The issue is not a matter of semantics; there is a real difference between the two proposals as drafted. I urge the Minister to do something about that if he can. The Government amendment in lieu refers to the necessity to

"take reasonable steps to avoid (so far as practicable) the risk that...the provision, in pursuance of the arrangements, of assistance to a court or to the Parole Board".

That is a welcome paragraph. The amendment then refers to the risk that

"the carrying out, in pursuance of the arrangements, of any other activities, might be adversely affected by any potential conflict between the provider's obligations in relation to those activities and the financial interests of the provider."

That broadly reflects the thrust of the second half of the Lords amendment, so my concern there is of no account. Simply because I am happy to accept, for present purposes, the Government amendment in lieu—I am not going to take this matter to a dispute—I urge the Minister to take into account some of the remarks that I have made on the wording, so that the obligation on the Secretary of State is that much firmer than it currently appears to be. If the Minister cannot offer me that help, could he please explain the Government's requirement that there should be that obvious difference, between "ensure" and the necessity to take reasonable steps?

Mr. Jeremy Browne: My contribution will be extremely brief, because I wish only to echo some of the sentiments that the hon. and learned Gentleman has expressed. Lords amendment No. 11 was a Conservative amendment introduced in the other place, but it was supported by my party and as a consequence passed there, which is why we are considering it here this evening.

We remain concerned about the potential for conflicts of interest. Although we welcome the progress that has been made, in terms of the Government seeking to accommodate and respond to those concerns, in an ideal world we should like them to move further. We would greatly welcome it if the Minister were minded to address himself to the points that the hon. and learned Gentleman has made about whether the wording of the Government amendment in lieu could be made tighter and more onerous in the burden that it imposes.

Mr. Hanson: I shall try to respond to the points that have been made. I am grateful for the relatively warm welcome that the hon. and learned Member for Harborough and the hon. Member for Taunton have given the Government amendment in lieu. I believe that we have moved and that we have listened to another place, but obviously there are still matters on which I should be happy to reflect, which the hon. and learned Gentleman has brought to the House's attention.

The hon. and learned Gentleman asked, in broad terms, whether it was more appropriate for the duty to rest with the Secretary of State rather than with the provider. We have taken the view that regional commissioners will have a strategic overview of all services that are being delivered in their region. That means that they will be better placed to assess and police potential conflicts of interest than the Secretary of State. However, I am again happy to reflect on what the hon. and learned Gentleman said and to listen to the points that have been made.

The hon. and learned Gentleman asked why we had used the words "so far as practicable". Parliamentary counsel suggested that they were the most appropriate form of words to cover the issues raised in another place. I am happy to reflect on what the hon. and learned Gentleman said, but that was the point that was put to us.

Mr. Garnier: I do not want any more bites at the cherry than are necessary. I am not so much fussed about "so far as practicable", as with

"the need to take reasonable steps to avoid"

as compared with "ensure". That is the distinction that worries me.

Mr. Hanson: I will reflect further on the hon. and learned Gentleman's points. We will certainly try to ensure that conflicts of interest do not cause problems.

When the court requests a pre-sentence report, it will also provide an indication of the expected sentencing outcome. The report can then be focused accordingly. Secondly, the report must adhere to national standards, which has been made clear in the strengthened amendment. Thirdly, there is clear guidance about the type of structure appropriate for the report, based on the seriousness of the offence and appropriate response. I hope that that helps the hon. and learned Gentleman with his concerns, although, as I say, I am happy to reflect further.

[Mr. Hanson]

We have moved considerably in respect of the Lords amendments. I hope that the House will accept our proposals while I undertake to look further into the hon. and learned Gentleman's points.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 11 agreed to.

Clause 5

POWER TO ESTABLISH PROBATION TRUSTS

Lords amendment: No. 14.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendment No. 35 and Government amendment (a) thereto, and Lords amendment No. 36.

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move Government amendment (a), which amends Lords amendment No. 35 and relates to clause 5(1)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are debating Lords amendment No. 14. Together with it, we are debating Lords amendment No. 35, Government amendment (a) and Lords amendment No. 36. The principal subject of the debate, on which the Question will initially be put, is Lords amendment No. 14. The question is whether you agree or disagree with that.

Mr. Hanson: My apologies for the confusion, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In due course, I shall move amendment (a). That would amend Lords amendment No. 35, which relates to clause 5(1). That enables the Secretary of State to establish, dissolve or alter the name or purposes of a probation trust by means of an order. An order establishing a probation trust under clause 5(1) will set out the names and purposes of the trust.

We originally proposed that the order should not be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. There is a precedent for this matter in respect of procedures applying to NHS trusts. As before, however, I have listened to the views expressed in the other place and I acknowledge the legitimate interest of Parliament in these matters. I accept that parliamentary scrutiny is appropriate. However, given the number of trusts to be established and the routine nature of the process as we move from boards to trusts over the next three years, I feel that the order should be subject to the negative rather than the affirmative procedure. That will provide the necessary safeguards to prevent excessive demands on parliamentary time.

There is one further strand to the amendment, relating to clause 5(3)(c), which gives the Secretary of State the power to extend probation purposes by regulation. In response to a recommendation from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, the Lords accepted a Government amendment subjecting that power to an affirmative resolution procedure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I interrupt the Minister, as it is important for us to clarify the position? Is the Minister agreeing or disagreeing with Lords amendment No. 14? Would he like to express his intention?

7.15 pm

Mr. Hanson: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am seeking to agree with amendment No. 14, so I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

In tabling amendment (a), which will amends Lords amendment No. 35, I have indicated that we are moving to accept the principle of parliamentary scrutiny, which the other place requested. Originally, we proposed that the orders should not be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. I have now decided that such scrutiny is appropriate, and I have indicated that the order should be subject to the negative rather than the affirmative procedure.

We have moved some way towards the other place's general wishes on such matters.

Mr. Garnier: Before the Minister concludes his remarks, may I clarify his position, so that I can respond more or less intelligently to it? As I understand it, the Government now apparently accept Lords amendment No. 14, which would remove clause 5(6), but disagree with Lords amendment No. 35, which removes the word "under" and adds the words,

"or regulations under—

( ) section 5(1) or (3)(c),"

The Government wish to replace "5(1) or (3)(c)" with "5(3)(c)". The effect of the Government's case is that the statutory instrument will be subject to the negative, as opposed to the affirmative, procedure. Will the Minister remind the House of which bit of his argument puts forward that case?

Mr. Hanson: For the avoidance of confusion—I would not want to confuse the House in the presence of such an eminent lawyer as the hon. and learned Gentleman—the Government seek to agree with Lords amendment No. 14, which is in relation to clause 5. In relation to clause 33, however, the Government seek to disagree with Lords amendments Nos. 35 and 36. I have tabled Government amendment (a), which would provide for the negative rather than the affirmative procedure. I have moved some way towards the position of the other place.

With that clarification, and with my apologies to the House for the confusion at the beginning of the debate, I believe that the hon. and learned Gentleman will, on reflection, see that the Government are trying to support the objective of the other place. We are simply changing from the affirmative to the negative procedure, because, given that there are 40-plus trusts, it would cause some difficulty were the affirmative procedure used each time the matter came before the House.

Mr. Garnier: I think that I now understand what the Government are seeking to achieve. I am pleased that they are prepared to accept Lords amendment No. 14. I shall have a few things to say about Government amendment (a).

First, may I establish what we are talking about? We are discussing a power given to the Secretary of State to establish probation trusts, the successor bodies to probation boards, which have been happily doing their work over the last few years following the Government's changes to the probation system in 2000.

Clause 5 states:

"The Secretary of State may by order…establish a probation trust…alter the name or purposes of a probation trust…dissolve a probation trust."

The Secretary of State can require the probation trust to do all sorts of things, which are set out in the clause, in line with the purposes that he will decide for it. Interestingly enough, clause 5(3) states:

"The purposes of a probation trust may include all or any of the following…the making or performance by the trust of contracts with another probation trust or any other person which provide for the carrying out by the trust of activities which contribute to the achievement of any purpose mentioned in section 2(1)…the making or performance by the trust of contracts with the Secretary of State for the carrying out by the trust of activities anywhere in the world"—

well, I have heard of ambition, but that seems to take it to an extraterritorial dimension—

"which…are to be carried out in connection with persons who are or have been subject to proceedings in service courts…correspond to activities which, if carried out in connection with persons charged with or convicted of offences, would contribute to the achievement of any purpose mentioned in section 2(1)…any other purpose specified for the purposes of this section by regulations made by the Secretary of State."

So the Secretary of State wants us to give him a collection of powers, which he can then mess around with through secondary legislation.

Clause 33, in part 4, deals with orders and regulations, so it ties directly back to clause 5. Clause 33(1) states:

"Any power of the Secretary of State to make an order or regulations under this Act is exercisable by statutory instrument."

Subsection (2) states:

"An order or regulations under this Act may make…different provision for different purposes or different areas"—

unspecified and unseen—

"(b) incidental, supplemental, consequential, saving or transitional provision."

So, under clause 33(2), the Secretary of State will be given huge powers to alter the legislation and the arrangements made between himself and probation providers. No doubt all this will be divvied up by the regional offender manager, as the lead provider or commissioner.

As there will be lots of probation trusts and as the Secretary of State no doubt sees himself making lots of provisions,

"incidental, supplemental, consequential, saving or transitional",

he would find it rather more convenient for that to be done under the negative, as opposed to the affirmative, procedure. I am sorry, but I am not here for the convenience of the Government. Parliament is not here for the convenience of the Government. The Government are here for the convenience of the people and the people's representatives in the Chamber, elected by electors. If it is convenient for the Minister to require the Secretary of State to push all that through using the negative, as opposed to the affirmative, procedure, I am afraid that he does not carry me with him.

I wish to apply such negative proceedings as I can to Government amendment (a), so I might ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to allow me to test the opinion of the House on Government amendment (a), even if I am delighted that the Government accede to Lords amendment No. 14. It is highly important that Parliament, even by the very tips of its fingers, maintain some purchase on the Executive; otherwise, the Executive will just run away with themselves by using secondary legislation to change laws, particularly laws that affect the criminal justice system. I really do think that from time to time, the Government ought to condescend to allow Parliament to hold them to account.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is not one of the problems with the Government that they are including more and more secondary legislation in Bills, and then using the negative procedure, which really reduces scrutiny by Parliament? That needs to be looked at again.

Mr. Garnier: I wholeheartedly agree. The Government increasingly use administrative convenience to justify reducing the amount of parliamentary scrutiny given to the making of laws. These laws are not written in the air. They affect the people of this country, and there can be adverse consequences for those who breach them. We need to tread carefully when we are considering adjusting part of the criminal justice system.

The Minister was not impressed by my arguments, or even by those of the other place, about the super-affirmative procedure for which I argued a moment ago. He has now gone right to the other end of the spectrum. Far from permitting the use of the super-affirmative or the affirmative system, he wants to whack this through using the negative system. This is one of those occasions on which Parliament must draw a line and say, "Thus far and no further."

Mr. Jeremy Browne: I congratulate both the Minister and the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) on making sense of the alphabet soup of legislative proposals that have been put before us. I am sure that all hon. Members who have attended the debate are now much clearer about where we stand and the features of the proposals that we are considering.

I start with the view that was articulated by the hon. and learned Gentleman: I am suspicious of untrammelled and unfettered Executive power and authority. It is increasingly a feature of the Government's legislation that power is vested in the Secretary of State without as much reference to Parliament as I would like. There is particular cause for concern, because Parliament will not be fully scrutinising decisions taken in this top-down system involving so-called regional offender managers who will be imposing their will and that of the Secretary of State on localities that would be better suited to making such decisions themselves.

I welcome the Minister's concession that orders that would not have received any parliamentary scrutiny at all will now receive a degree of such scrutiny. However, it was extraordinary that the Government even contemplated the way forward that they initially proposed. The fact that they thought that no system of parliamentary scrutiny would be necessary was perhaps indicative of the mindset of a Government who have been in power for more than a decade and are more concerned about making legislation efficient for the convenience of Ministers than about elected Members' ability to scrutinise the Government effectively. I have a bias towards proper scrutiny of the Government.

[Mr. Jeremy Browne]

Ministers should welcome the burden of that scrutiny, because it adds to the quality of legislation. For that reason, although I welcome the Government's modest step in the right direction, I think that the Minister should be willing to take a bigger, bolder and more ambitious step by allowing the use of the affirmative procedure, rather than the negative procedure. If the matter is pressed to a Division, I will vote accordingly.

Mr. Hanson: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I have accepted the other place's proposal that parliamentary scrutiny of these matters is required. I hope that the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) and the hon. Member for Taunton (Mr. Browne) welcome the fact that the Government have recognised that there is a need for such scrutiny. The simple difference between us is whether that scrutiny should be carried out under the affirmative or the negative procedure.

Given the amount of such parliamentary scrutiny that might be required, the time that that might take in the House and the fact that these issues will often be uncontroversial, I thought that it would be better to use the negative procedure. If people are concerned about the issue, they can pray against the order and it can be debated and determined by the House.

Mr. Bone: I hope that the Minister agrees that just because the order is prayed against does not necessarily mean that it will be scrutinised.

7.30 pm

Mr. Hanson: I accept that, and I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman has made. However, I must tell the House, the hon. and learned Member for Harborough and the hon. Member for Taunton that if the matter was controversial, there would be an opportunity to debate it on the negative procedure. I am simply trying to ensure that parliamentary scrutiny takes place if needed. I have moved my position. I have not moved as far as another place would wish, but I have tried to suggest a helpful compromise.

Mr. Garnier: Conversely, does the Minister not accept that if it is an uncontroversial matter but is none the less to be dealt with under the affirmative procedure, the House will not delay it? It could appear on the Order Paper in such a way that it does not upset the business managers—we would not want to do that, would we?

Mr. Hanson: As a former business manager in another life, I certainly would not want to have been upset in that way, nor would I wish to upset my colleagues on this occasion. There is a disagreement between us and, as ever, I suggest that we test whether the affirmative procedure is appropriate. I urge the House to support Government amendment (a).

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 2

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENSURING THE PROVISION OF PROBATION SERVICES

Lords amendment: No. 4

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 5 and 15, 16 and Government amendments (a) to (g) thereto, and Lords amendments Nos. 20 and 39 to 41.

Mr. Garnier: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm for the benefit of all hon. Members that Government amendment (a), which we discussed in the previous group of amendments, will be dealt with at the end of proceedings?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, that is true. We always debate one amendment or new clause, and discuss other things at the same time, then vote on the amendment that we are debating. We take the other things as they come, in their normal order, on the amendment paper.

Mr. Hanson: I accept that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This group of amendments is the result of valuable discussions both here and in another place. Concerns had been expressed that non-public sector providers might not be required to reach the same standards as the public sector, so we have provided safeguards on standards and training. The Secretary of State must now publish guidelines on the qualifications, experience or training for staff working directly with offenders, and he must publish national standards for the management of offenders. The Bill ensures that both training guidelines and the national standards will apply to all providers as appropriate. We have provided safeguards in respect of local accountability, and we have responded to the concerns of staff and trade unions. The Bill has been greatly improved by the addition of those provisions, which I commend to the House.

Mr. Garnier: While the official Opposition may disagree with points of detail, I understand from those who know more about national bargaining and such matters that the National Association of Probation Officers and others are content with the structure that the Government have provided. In so far as they deal with national pay bargaining, the national regulatory framework that deals with the disciplining and regulation of providers of probation services, and so on, the amendments are acceptable.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 1

MEANING OF "THE PROBATION PURPOSES"

Lords amendment: No. 1.

Mr. Hanson: I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendments.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this we may discuss Lords amendments Nos. 2, 3, 7, 10, 17 to 19, 21, 24 to 34, 37, 42 to 46 and 47, Government consequential (a) and Lords amendments Nos. 48 to 56.

Mr. Hanson: The amendments are all relatively minor, technical and consequential, and I do not propose to speak to them individually. I believe that they will attract no controversy, and I commend them to the House.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 2, 3, 5 and 7 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 8 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 8 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 9 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 10 agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 12 and 13 disagreed to.

Lords amendment No. 15 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 16 and Government amendments (a) to (g) thereto agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 17 to 21 agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 23 disagreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 24 to 34 agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 35.

Motion made, and Question put, That amendment (a) thereto be made:—*[Claire Ward.]*

The House divided: Ayes 266, Noes 127.

Division No. 195] **[7.44 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn

Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Bob Blizzard and Claire Ward

NOES

Amess, Mr. David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Field, Mr. Mark
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harvey, Nick
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Herbert, Nick
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Horam, Mr. John
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Reid, Mr. Alan
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Alan
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Walker, Mr. Charles
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mr. Roger
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Evennett and Mr. Richard Benyon

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment, as amended, agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 38 disagreed to.

Remaining Lords amendments, and consequential Government amendment (a) to Lords amendment No. 47, agreed to.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments Nos. 6, 9, 12, 13, 22, 23 and 38; Mr. Jeremy Browne, Mr. Alan Campbell, Mr. Edward Garnier, Mr. David Hanson and Lynda Waltho; Mr. David Hanson to be the Chairman of the Committee; Three to be the quorum of the Committee.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With the leave of the House, I will take motions 6, 7 and 8 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No.118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

European Communities

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (Stabilisation and Association Agreement) (Republic of Albania) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 20th June, be approved.

Electronic Communications

That the draft Data Retention (EC Directive) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 28th June, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Terrorism (Northern Ireland) Act 2006 (Transitional Provisions and Savings) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 28th June, be approved.—*[Alison Seabeck.]*

Question agreed to.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

ELECTORAL COMMISSIONERS

Motion made and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [11 July] and Standing Order No.118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint as Electoral Commissioners—

(1) Maxwell Marshall Caller CBE for the period ending on 31st December 2011;

(2) Henrietta Campbell CB for the period ending on 31st December 2011;

(3) Ian Maxwell Kelsall OBE with effect from 19th January 2008 for the period ending on 31st December 2012; and

(4) John McCormick with effect from 19th January 2008 for the period ending on 31st December 2012.—*[Alison Seabeck.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees).

STABILITY AND CONVERGENCE PROGRAMMES

That this House takes note of European Union Documents No. 6801/07 to No. 6809/07, No. 6812/07 to No. 6819/07 and Corrigendum 1, No. 6820/07 to No. 6821/07, No. 6823/07 and No. 7863/07 to No. 7867/07, Council Opinions on the Updated Stability and Convergence Programmes of each Member State except Austria and the Czech Republic; and supports a prudent interpretation of the Stability and Growth Pact which takes into account the level of debt, the economic cycle and public investment.—*[Alison Seabeck.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Ordered,

DELEGATED LEGISLATION COMMITTEES

That the Motion in the name of Mr Secretary Hutton relating to Financial Assistance to Industry shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—*[Alison Seabeck.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Council Tax

8 pm

Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): I am grateful for this opportunity to present a petition on the important subject of the council tax, the level of which has almost doubled in the past decade. The petition reads:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of residents of the Taunton constituency and others,

Declares that the petitioners are extremely concerned that the determination of Council Tax levels in Taunton Deane and nationally do not fairly reflect the ability of citizens to pay

Further notes that pensioners and those on a low income are especially disadvantaged as they have to pay a larger proportion of their income towards Council Tax than those with higher incomes

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to abolish the Council Tax and replace it with a system that reflects the ability to pay.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Crown Post Offices (Disabled Access)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Michael Foster.]*

8.1 pm

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this debate on the issues arising from the proposed transfer of Crown post offices to WH Smith. Several colleagues and I have written to my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs on the subject. The issues arise from the fact that the Post Office has reached a franchise agreement with WH Smith; it is proposed that from September this year about 70 Crown post offices be closed, and their services provided by WH Smith stores nearby. There have already been trials involving six Crown post offices.

The issues are inevitably difficult and controversial for local communities, and there has been a lot of concern and disquiet about the way in which the process has been managed. In Blackpool, for example, there has been much concern about the fact that the Abingdon street post office, which has been a central feature of Blackpool for nearly 60 years, and which is a listed building, will no longer provide its services. There are broader issues to do with the abandonment of a prime town centre site, and the transfer of services to a less well known one, and there are concerns about the position of staff, which the Communication Workers Union and others have already raised. However, I want to focus on the proposals' implications for access for people with disabilities or mobility difficulties, and for people who have children and use buggies or other things of that nature.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) and I have met representatives from WH Smith and post office staff in Blackpool on several occasions, and we have visited the proposed site. There is real concern, and it is shared by a number of other hon. Members; as I have said, we set out those concerns in a letter that the Minister received earlier this week. The changes will cause further pressures, too. A 20 per cent. reduction in counter size is proposed in Blackpool, which will cause difficulties. In addition, a number of the WH Smith stores that are part of the franchise proposals have not included the provision of adequate access for disabled customers in their plans. In Blackpool, the post office counters will be in the basement of the WH Smith Bank Hey street store, but post office and WH Smith staff agree that the lift is likely to be too small for many wheelchair users.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (David Lepper) raised with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform last week a similar issue in respect of the WH Smith branch in Brighton, in Churchill square, where the facilities are also located in the basement and although there is an escalator facility, it goes down only and not up.

Many vulnerable groups, including older and disabled customers, use the existing post office facilities. They carry out everyday tasks there. Often the Crown offices provide a hub for personal finance and benefit collection. In Blackpool, the Abingdon street post office, to which I have already referred, borders on a well known indoor market. It is opposite the famous Winter Gardens conference centre and the town centre church. The proposed replacement at Bank Hey street is much further away and is in no sense part of the centre of the town. I believe that the franchise agreement could have a negative impact on many of the consumer groups that I have mentioned if the issues of access are not properly addressed by the Post Office and by WH Smith before any transfer of services takes place.

I shall quote for the Minister comments that I have received in the past couple of days. One is from the director of Age Concern in Blackpool, Ruth Lambert, who says:

"I am totally at a loss as to why the Post Office has failed to take its elderly customers into consideration in this move. The WH Smith store is in a basement. There is a small lift that cannot hold more than one wheelchair at a time. What does this mean for people who need carers or for large groups of customers who have mobility problems?"

She goes on to make a point that might not be immediately apparent:

"The new site is much closer to the sea and therefore the wind can be a real challenge to elderly people. WH Smith is also a long walk from the nearest bus stop and this will be a big challenge to any person, elderly or not, who suffers with limited mobility."

That view is echoed in the letter that Blackpool council sent to the Post Office, protesting at the proposed relocation, in which it said that the relocation to the basement of WH Smith is

"wholly unsuitable for reasons of accessibility for disabled and elderly people, reduced floor space on what is currently available, and general potential quality of service compared to the Abingdon street facility."

About 22 per cent. of the adult population of the UK are classed as disabled under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995—that is, just under 10 million adults. It is not just customers with mobility problems who may be affected by the changes. Customers who are blind, partially sighted or deaf will also face challenges. The Post Office has very good provision of induction loops for hearing aids, as well as visual indicators for deaf customers, but no guarantees have been given so far that that will be the case for the post office counters in the WH Smith stores. I have been in conversation with the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, and they have both expressed their concerns.

The Post Office also has a varying—at least by region—but fairly solid track record of ensuring fair and equal access for blind customers. With the introduction of chip and pin services last year, all stores including WH Smith now operate that system. RNIB advised the Post Office on the accessibility of chip and pin pads, and the Post Office consulted RNIB, but RNIB's concern is that WH Smith has not so far consulted and may not consult on any future changes to chip and pin to accommodate blind and partially sighted people.

That inevitably raises the issue of staff experience in these areas. There has already been significant controversy about the fact that because the sum that will be paid to the new WH Smith staff is considerably less per hour than that paid to current Post Office employees, the likelihood is that the vast majority of the staff in the proposed new branches will be new staff. My local newspaper, the Blackpool *Gazette*, today reveals that

"The stationery giant"—

that is, WH Smith—

"has advertised sales assistant posts at its Bank Hey Street store. . .

The wage offered is 12p above the national minimum wage at £5.65 per hour."

That is reckoned to be just under half of what current workers are paid at Abingdon street. I am not asking the Minister to comment on whether that is a good and acceptable wage for the service that is proposed, but it is fairly obvious that the vast majority of Crown post office staff, certainly in the case of Blackpool, are unlikely to transfer in those circumstances, and there will therefore be a big issue as regards new staff. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood and I have pressed WH Smith and the Post Office on the training facilities available for that purpose in the limited time span for the transfer, we have not received very satisfactory answers.

Blackpool, in particular, has a high number of tourists and visitors during the peak holiday season, many of whom need and want to use post office services during their stay. As a result, the access problems of WH Smith stores in Blackpool, Carlisle, Ilford, Brighton and elsewhere, which already affect disabled, old and vulnerable customers, will be exacerbated during peak visitor times in seaside and coastal towns. That has moved other hon. Members to join me in expressing these concerns. I remind the Minister that among the other Crown post offices on the list for closure are Bournemouth, Canterbury, Folkestone and Great Yarmouth.

The Government are the sole shareholder in Royal Mail, and the Post Office is therefore classed as a public authority. All such bodies are subject to the disability equality duty, or DED, which is meant to ensure that all public bodies pay due regard to the promotion of equality for disabled people in every area of their work. Forty-five thousand public bodies across the UK are covered by the DED, many of which should have produced and published a disability equality scheme, or DES, by 4 December 2006, including the Post Office. Generally, the DES is intended to promote a duty for equality of opportunity between disabled people and other citizens, to eliminate discrimination and harassment, to promote positive attitudes to disabled people, and to take into account any impairment. Specifically, the Post Office is required by regulation, as part of the DED, to produce and publish a DES that is supposed to be drawn up in consultation with disabled people who are Post Office stakeholders and include staff and customers.

For these purposes, the franchise agreement is exactly the same as contracting out by a public body. The Post Office is contracting out its services to WH Smith, and WH Smith is therefore bound by the same conditions as the Post Office in relation to the DED. Regrettably, however, there are few signs so far that WH Smith is taking that responsibility seriously. Central to the DED in relation to the proposed transfer of service from the Post Office to WH Smith is the requirement on public authorities to conduct a full disability equality impact assessment when there are any proposed changes to service delivery. Transferring the products and services of the Post Office, a public authority, into the basement of another building, as is the case in Blackpool, will have a significant impact on service delivery. The DES should therefore state clearly how the Post Office will conduct an impact assessment in Blackpool and elsewhere. I ask the Minister urgently to ensure that that takes place not only in Blackpool but in the other locations that are earmarked for closure.

The Disability Rights Commission, with which I have been in contact, is not aware of any up-to-date assessment that has been made in respect of the schemes for transfer. The DRC has the power to take legal action where public authorities fail to carry out their responsibilities under the DED, and those authorities may then be subject to judicial review by the DRC.

Those are the potential legal implications, but my question is this: where is the proactive element in this transfer? Why have not the Post Office and WH Smith already had this proper consultation with stakeholders? That concern is shared by organisations representing older people. Gordon Lishman, the director general of Age Concern, has said:

"Many older people consider their post office to be a lifeline...If a post office must be relocated within another business to avoid closure, the expertise and skills of staff must continue to be provided. The post office services must also be in an accessible position within the business; this is particularly important for older people who may have mobility problems."

The senior policy officer at Help the Aged, Alan Burnett, said:

"Help the Aged are concerned about these proposals and believe that the devil is in the detail. Older people must be consulted and the needs of the most vulnerable must be considered when making changes to the post office."

It may be said that these are matters of detail between WH Smith and the Post Office and not, therefore, a direct responsibility of Ministers and officials. However, WH Smith and the Post Office have so far manifestly failed to address the issues proactively. To give one example, when my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood originally spoke to local staff about the problem of a significant number of people who use wheelchairs not being able to get into the lift to the basement—it was generally agreed to be too small for motorised wheelchairs—one of them said, "Oh well, if they turn up like that, we'll just have to transfer them into smaller wheelchairs." I submit that that is not a hopeful sign in the course of the transfer of a culture of respect for people with problems of mobility and disability.

In any case, broader policy issues are raised that are a matter for the Government, as sole shareholder in Royal Mail. This Government have placed strong emphasis on disability issues since 1997, and I am proud of their record in that respect. They have supported people with disabilities; introduced a range of policies protecting people from discrimination on the grounds of disability; helped more people with disabilities to find and stay in work; and supported those whose disabilities mean that they are unable to work. In April 2000, the Government established the Disability Rights Commission, and they implemented duties under part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to improve disabled people's access to goods, services, and facilities. Since 1999, service providers have had to make reasonable adjustments to the way in which they provide their services so that disabled people can use them. Since 2004, they have had to take reasonable steps to tackle physical features that

[Mr. Gordon Marsden]

continue to make it impossible, or unreasonably difficult, for disabled people to access a service. All of that is very good.

I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate him on his appointment—not least because he has come to his new Department from the Cabinet Office where there was a strong, groundbreaking focus on social inclusion under the previous Government. The establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should send out a strong message to disabled groups and others that the Government take equality seriously, but I am concerned that the fiasco of the franchise agreement could damage that track record.

I believe that if we will the ends, we have to will the means. That means that the Government have to live up to their responsibilities as a shareholder, and more broadly, promote a non-discriminatory and non-excluding programme. The range of concerns that I and other hon. Members have, and the complaints and protests from throughout the country, show that the circumstances in Blackpool are not an isolated incident. The worst possible thing for any transfer of services between the Post Office and WH Smith would be if customers became fraught with real difficulties that led to a host of legal challenges on the grounds of non-implementation of the DDA.

Therefore, I ask the Minister not to allow the Post Office and WH Smith to duck the issue any longer. I ask him to ensure that the Government look urgently at the situation in all the Crown post offices scheduled for transfer to WH Smith, and to do the assessment on access which should already have taken place. I ask also that they consult and make whatever adjustments the letter and spirit of the DDA require, and that they do so properly and comprehensively, involving stakeholder groups in places where the changes are proposed, even if it means delays in the handover process.

In the event of any transfer in Blackpool, I ask the Government to consider specifically providing extra lift provision and making other adjustments to render the problems that we have identified less acute.

Whatever service changes take place, there should be no outsourcing or franchising of basic equality principles that might result in preventing or making difficult access and provision for the elderly, those who have disabilities or anyone with access or mobility problems.

8.20 pm

The Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs (Mr. Pat McFadden): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) on securing this evening's debate. I know that he cares deeply about his constituents and wants to secure the best possible access for them to Post Office services. That was evident from his speech. As he said, he and other hon. Members have already written to me about the issue.

I want to begin by setting out a few general points on Post Office Ltd's decision to enter into a franchise agreement with WH Smith, and then to try to tackle some of the specific issues that my hon. Friend raised about the Blackpool transfer, especially disability access, on which he focused.

The future of the post office network is a subject of great relevance to all hon. Members, irrespective of whether we have a Crown post office in our constituencies. The Post Office is run on an arm's length basis and Ministers do not make day-to-day decisions about the location of individual post office branches. However, I emphasise that the Government share hon. Members' concerns about securing a sustainable future for the Post Office and ensuring reasonable access to Post Office services for the public.

The decision by Post Office Ltd to enter into a commercial agreement with WH Smith has generated a great deal of interest and debate. It is not the first time that Post Office services have been shared with other retail space. Post offices already share space with retail networks such as the Co-op, Martin McColl and Spar. More than 95 per cent. of post offices in this country are run by private operators, often with a shared retail space.

There are approximately 450 Crown post offices, and they lost a combined total of £70 million last year and some £50 million the year before that. The network is therefore undergoing change, partly as a result of wider changes to the way in which we go about our business. For example, many of us choose to pay bills by direct debit; nine out of 10 people approaching retirement choose to have pensions paid into a bank account; communications technologies have undergone a revolution in recent years, and some 4 million fewer people use post offices compared with only two years ago. Clearly, that is not sustainable, and the Government support Post Office Ltd's policy for reducing the losses. It includes maintaining a core network of Crown post offices and franchising branches when opportunities arise and when that would benefit future post office provision. We have welcomed the commercial deal between Post Office Ltd and WH Smith, which was announced on 19 April, because it will secure the retention of a main post office service in each of those areas. That point should not be lost in the debate about Crown branches.

As my hon. Friend said, six pilot projects of such transfers were carried out before the current franchising arrangement was announced. My understanding is that the majority of customers in those pilots welcomed the pleasant environment and the customer service. They also welcomed the extended opening hours for the service. I understand that that factor will apply to the Blackpool transfer.

In some cases, the franchising of a Crown post office has been portrayed as a closure. I accept that my hon. Friend did not intend to do that. However, there is an important difference—franchising is not closure. Without the sort of deal that we are considering, a question mark would have hung over the future many Crown post offices. The Post Office is seeking to create more certainty about the future, and in particular about how the main Post Office service will be provided in our town centres. The arrangement brings a level of certainty about the future of the 70 offices concerned.

Let me turn to some of the specifics that my hon. Friend mentioned. He expressed concern about the quality of service under the new arrangement. This is an important issue and he is right to raise it, but it

would not be right to conclude that franchising will automatically lead to a reduction in quality of service. We should remember that only about 3 per cent. of posts offices are Crown post offices, directly managed and staffed by Post Office Ltd employees. I am sure that none of us would suggest that the equally hard-working sub-postmasters and mistresses and their staff who work in the remaining 97 per cent. of the branches are providing an inferior service. Franchisees are bound by stringent contractual requirements to ensure that service standards remain at the same high level after transferring from direct management of Post Office Ltd. Staff will be trained by Post Office Ltd and expected to maintain the standards of service that the public have a right to expect.

My hon. Friend concentrated on access for people with disabilities. He is right to stress that it is important. Royal Mail Group has been working to the spirit of existing disability legislation, is committed to its being complied with and has a strong track record in improving and promoting positive attitudes. Post Office Ltd is committed to ensuring that disability access remains a priority. My understanding is that the issue has featured in discussions between the Post Office and WH Smith. The two organisations are working together to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to ensure effective reasonable adjustment to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. My understanding is that WH Smith has spent about £1.5 million on improving access in stores and new sites opened since 2003, to meet DDA regulations.

My hon. Friend pointed out that the space identified in the Blackpool store is in the basement. The same is true of a number of franchised post offices, where the space identified will be either on the first floor or in basement space. Post Office Ltd has given an assurance that the location of all branches will comply with the 1995 Act and be accessible to all customers. Arrangements will be in place to assist customers with special access needs in branches such as Blackpool, where the post office counter is not on the ground floor. I accept that my hon. Friend spoke about his own constituency, that he has visited the proposed new location and that I have not, so I tread carefully. However, I understand that there is a lift to help customers with disabilities. My hon. Friend has expressed concern, tonight and in his letter, about the quality of the lift. I understand that WH Smith plans to refurbish and redecorate it and to carry out any reasonable improvements to assist further those customers with disabilities.

I understand that there is more queuing space in the WH Smith office than in the current office. In the event of a customer being for some reason unable to use the lift or the stairs to access the serving positions, arrangements will be available to ensure that they can be served by Post Office-trained staff on the ground floor. As one would expect from an established and prominent high street retailer, WH Smith is fully aware of its responsibilities under the 1995 Act and will ensure that the branch remains fully accessible for customers, including those with mobility problems.

My hon. Friend has made clear his continuing concerns tonight. I am sure that both Post Office Ltd and WH Smith will read his speech. Ultimately, it is in no one's interests for customers to be discouraged from conducting their business or from having a less favourable experience of the service in future.

In conclusion, the Post Office has been deprived of much needed investment over the years. The Government have put in some £2 billion since 1999 and we plan further investment in the future. The Post Office is now diversifying into providing foreign currency, fixed line telephone services and new products such as credit cards. Change is never easy and I appreciate my hon. Friend's commitment, reflected in his speech tonight, but franchising is neither new nor an enemy of Post Office services. In fact, it may be a crucial factor ensuring their survival.

We value the social role of the Post Office, but we also accept that it operates in a competitive marketplace and that change means that it, too, will have to change in the future. I believe that we have set out a framework to create a stable network in the future, so that the Post Office can move forward with confidence and rise to the challenges ahead. I appreciate the difficulties at this time of change. I am sure that the Post Office will have heard my hon. Friend's points, but I hope that the arrangements—

The motion having been made after Seven o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at twenty-nine minutes to Nine o'clock.

Deferred Division

Political Parties

That the draft Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 21st June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 295, Noes 141.

Division No. 190]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, Danny
Anderson, Mr. David
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
Davey, Mr. Edward
David, Mr. Wayne
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Don
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Helen
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Hemming, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hunter, Mark
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kramer, Susan
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, Mr. David
Laws, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Mole, Chris
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Mudie, Mr. George
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reid, Mr. Alan
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Smith, Sir Robert
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard

Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willott, Jenny
Wills, Mr. Michael
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Duddridge, James
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Hosie, Stewart
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Young, rh Sir George

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 19 July 2007

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Food Production

1. **Bob Russell** (Colchester) (LD): What assistance he is giving for the promotion of local food production. [150585]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Joan Ruddock): DEFRA launched a regional food strategy in December 2002. Since then we have helped to encourage a flourishing quality regional and local food sector and given £20 million of support.

Bob Russell: I thank the Under-Secretary for her reply and welcome her to her post. Britain should be growing more of its own food and importing less. Does she agree that it is not acceptable for supermarkets to describe as "local" food that may have been grown hundreds of miles away and transported through central processing and packaging points?

Joan Ruddock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his kind words. I am disappointed that he has not raised the Colchester native oyster application, as he has done so often and on which I understand DEFRA is waiting for more information before sending to the EU.

Of course it is essential that labelling is accurate and that consumers are well informed about the produce that they purchase. However, there needs to be a life cycle analysis to determine which food is more or less environmentally friendly in its growing, production, packaging and dispatch. Food that comes from a distance does not always have more environmental impact than food grown locally with very high inputs. It is a complicated science. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a good point and we need to make sure that consumers are aware and can make appropriate choices.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my hon. Friend to her post; it is well deserved and I am sure that we look forward to working with each other for many years.

Community agriculture is beginning to grow in various parts of the country, Stroud being a wonderful example. It involves people taking food production into their own hands, which it is necessary to support. One way in which that can be done is by making sure that community agriculture links in with the county farm estates, of which I have been a supporter for many years. I hope that my hon. Friend will look at that and ensure that we get local food for local people that is grown by local people.

Joan Ruddock: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks and pay tribute to his interest in the environment, particularly local food and its quality. Food from Britain is a programme that has the support of DEFRA in which we are endeavouring to give assistance to farmers to improve their production, quality, labelling and marketing. This is very important to us and the Department will continue to give appropriate support to the food industry, including farmers.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): From her time on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the Under-Secretary will recall the importance of the rural development programme. Is she aware that her Department is spending some £260 million on consultants but only £300 million of its own money to top up the rural development programme? In her new role, will she look at reducing expenditure on consultants and spending more on the rural development programme for the benefit of local food producers?

Joan Ruddock: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks and for his reference to my record. Consultants are an easy target for suggesting that they are not worth their money. I would judge each case on its own merits, and would want to know what the consultants were engaged to do and whether they helped the people they were advising to achieve their objectives. That is the way in which these judgments have to be made, but I am very happy to look at his specific points.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I formally welcome the Under-Secretary to what I think is her first paid Front-Bench position? I recall that she was one of the unpaid Ministers earlier in the Government's lifetime. I congratulate her on her appointment.

The hon. Lady rightly mentioned food labelling in answer to the first question. Has she had time to realise just what a shambles we have in our food labelling legislation? It is very confusing. Why do we have a system where some food is required to be labelled with its country of origin but not others: beef, but not pork or lamb; chicken from Brazil, but not from Belgium; honey, but not jam; olive oil, but not sunflower oil? We have complete confusion about our labelling legislation. If she really wants to promote local food—I believe from her record that she does—will she get a grip of our labelling rules and change them as soon as possible?

Joan Ruddock: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I agree that we need more transparency and clarity. The purpose of labelling is to put the consumer in the driving seat so that they can make appropriate choices and, where appropriate,

put pressure on producers and suppliers. Like him, I am keen for there to be improvements; I take the matter he raises seriously, and I and my colleagues will do all we can to enhance the regime.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) (Con): Does the Minister agree that increasing oil prices will push up the cost of buying produce from abroad? The Totnes pound, with which she might be familiar, offers a 5 per cent. discount on locally produced goods, and 70 local producers are offering it. Does not that initiative provide a good way of proceeding? There will be a stick and a local carrot; the stick will be rising oil prices and the local carrot will be an inducement to people to buy local goods. Is the Minister familiar with the Transition Town Totnes project?

Joan Ruddock: I think that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not yet being familiar with that project, but I intend to become familiar with it very soon. Consumers want to know where their food comes from, how it was grown and the circumstances of the people who produce it. It is good for both business and consumers if more local produce is made available, if it is appropriately described, and if, as is the case where there are markets, people can meet the producers. If the product is right, it is good for our health, too.

Sea Defences (East Coast)

2. **Mr. John Whittingdale** (Maldon and East Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of sea defences on the east coast; and if he will make a statement. [150586]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Phil Woolas): The level of protection provided by sea defences along the east coast of England varies, depending on the level of risk and the type of land use which would be affected by any flooding. However, the indicative standard of protection for urban areas against sea flooding, as set out in Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs guidance, is typically to protect against a once in 200 years-type event. It is for the Environment Agency and other operating authorities to assess the risk and fully consider improvements to defences.

Mr. Whittingdale: Is the Minister aware that the Environment Agency map shows some 2,600 properties around Maldon alone to be at risk from flooding, not to mention the Secretary of State's ancestral home? Does the Minister agree that the risk he describes is increasing, owing to rising sea levels, greater storm pressure and a subsiding land mass? Does he accept that much more money needs to be spent on sea defences and that if money is spent now the sums needed are likely to be far less than the catastrophic losses that would be incurred if a flood were to occur?

Mr. Woolas: It is of course recognised that there is a growing risk and threat, which is why the Government have provided extra resources for defences—I know that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that we have done so. One cannot provide against all eventualities, but extra resources have been provided for his region and the area he represents.

Mr. Anthony Wright (Great Yarmouth) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments and the fact that the Government have substantially increased the amount of money invested in coastal and flood defences. However, will the Minister consider providing compensation for home owners and businesses who might lose their properties as they are in areas where there will be a managed retreat because it is no longer affordable to defend the coastline?

Mr. Woolas: It is no coincidence that such questions have been raised by Members of both main parties representing constituencies in the eastern region. The Government are fully aware of the risks and the future decisions that will have to be taken. My hon. Friend's request will certainly be considered, but he would not expect me to give any pledges today.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the new ministerial team urgently look at the need to strengthen or replace the Thames barrier at some point in the next decade, as current predictions are that its design-life probably will not extend beyond 2020 at the latest? Given the pressures from flooding risks and the Government's worries about global warming, is there not an urgent need to manage the consequences of such developments, and could we not link a new barrier to reclaiming land from the estuary so that we create valuable land for building?

Mr. Woolas: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the defences, and that is being considered. All those issues are a question of balance. Judgments have to be made on the types of defences and where they should be. We should not confuse—I know that he is not doing so—the need to protect against floods and the various causes of floods and coastal erosion, which has already been mentioned as it affects the eastern region.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): After the events in Sheffield, Doncaster and Hull, the last of which was well protected against coastal flooding but not against surface water flooding, do the Government still agree with their response to the autumn 2004 "Making Space for Water" consultation, which said that

"to facilitate an holistic approach that is risk-driven, the Government will work towards giving the Environment Agency an overarching strategic overview across all flooding and coastal erosion risks"?

That was meant to happen by the end of 2006, according to the timeline at the back of the Government's response. Will Ministers now tell the devastated householders of Hull, Sheffield and Doncaster when the Government will deliver on their promised flooding overview?

Mr. Woolas: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the strategy set out in "Making Space for Water". I have to point out to the House that the floods, especially in the east Yorkshire and Hull area, were exceptional and would not have been prevented by an implementation of the policy that he raises. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that that is the Government's policy. Decisions and announcements in that area will be made by the Environment Agency, which is today publishing its consultation document on the specific aspects of the issue, and by the Government later in the year.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Will he join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) in commiserating with the people of Filey, who suffered overnight from unprecedented rainfall, which led to major evacuations? The effect of the rainfall was compounded by recent development and inadequate drainage, but the clear message is that more has to be spent on flood defences. Is the Minister aware that the chairman of the Yorkshire and Humber region flood defence committee has written to him, calling his attention to the fact that flood spending in the region will fall next year from £15.2 million to only £11.7 million? That is not the right message to send to people who have lost their homes and possessions in those unprecedented floods.

Mr. Woolas: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I know that she has great expertise on these issues, not least because of her constituency experience in Vale of York. I am, of course, aware of the events in Filey, which were similar in cause to those at Boscastle a few years ago. Anyone who knows Filey will be shocked to learn of the floods there.

On the resources that have been made available, we have to caution against taking too specific a view, because we have to consider the trend which in flood defence spending has been one of significant increases over the years. The time scales for all capital projects, and especially flood defence spending, mean that the wrong impression can be given by taking a figure out of context. However, I will of course reply to the chairman in full detail.

Renewable Energy

3. **Ian Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Minister for Energy on the development of renewable energy. [150587]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Phil Woolas): Support for renewable energy is an essential part of the Government's climate change programme and energy policy. I will continue to work closely with my ministerial colleagues to increase the share of UK electricity generated from renewables.

Ian Lucas: In Germany, 12 per cent. of energy is produced from renewable sources. Will my hon. Friend look closely at the success of the renewable energy Act in Germany and its proposals for revenue support, and will he discuss with the Energy Minister whether a similar system could be adopted in the UK, so that we can use the big house-building programme to advance renewable energy in this country?

Mr. Woolas: The answers to the questions are yes and yes. My hon. Friend has a strong record of campaigning on this matter, and his constituency shows the economic as well as environmental benefits that renewables can bring. On 9 March, the Council of Europe agreed a binding target of having 20 per cent. of the EU's overall energy consumption coming from renewables by 2020. We are working towards that, but a step change is coming, not least because of the new homes being built and the campaigning work being done by my hon. Friend and others.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Does the Minister agree that wind turbines are such a good idea that we should have hundreds, not to say thousands, of them offshore? That would allow us to take advantage of the higher wind velocity of some of the world's stormiest seas, achieve greater economies of scale and implement our leading-edge offshore technology. On top of that, we would not have to look at them, which would be preferable to spending large amounts of taxpayers' money on subsidising the despoiling of south Norfolk's gentle landscape with industrial wind turbines, each of which is taller than Norwich cathedral.

Mr. Woolas: I acknowledge the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but it would be wrong of me to give blanket approval for all such schemes, given the arguments from the shipping industry and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. On the whole, however, he makes a convincing case: our nation is blessed with offshore wind resources, and it would be wrong not to take advantage of them. Indeed, the Government's energy and environment policy is pushing in the direction that he outlines.

Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell) (Lab): May I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to what may be one of the most important positions in the Government? Has he had a chance to read the "Draft Options Paper on Renewable Targets" that has been circulated to Ministers? It deals with the 20 per cent. renewables target for the EU agreed at the spring Council, and speaks rather approvingly of what it describes as "scenario 1". However, by 2020 that would result in the UK delivering only 9 per cent. of renewable energy across all sectors, at a cost of £4 billion. That is less than half of the 20 per cent. by 2020 that the 2006 White Paper suggested was the Government's aspiration, and less than half of the EU target for that date. Will my hon. Friend speak to the Energy Minister at the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and put some backbone into what used to be known as the Department of Trade and Industry?

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. He said that mine was one of the most important jobs, but another word for it would be "challenging". I represent Oldham, where rainfall is significant, so I am clearly in a lose-lose situation in that regard, but I will look at the points that my hon. Friend makes. The "Draft Options Paper On Renewable Targets" is an important document: the two Departments responsible for energy and the environment work very closely together on Government policy, and it is important that we speak with one voice.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Given the impact on food prices of the diversion of production to ethanol, and the damage to the environment that the expansion of crops for ethanol can have in the developing world, will the Government consider drawing up a balance sheet of the pluses and minuses of biofuels? That will enable us to know clearly whether they will save the planet or damage it and cause undue suffering to its poorest inhabitants.

Mr. Woolas: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman speaks with common sense. What he suggests seems very sensible; so I think we should do it. All such decisions are a question of balancing the pros and cons, so the idea of balance sheet will be given consideration. The hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) made a similar point about food: such matters are not always as straightforward as they appear. We will do as the right hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr. Elliot Morley (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I, too, welcome my hon. Friend to his new post. On the question of encouraging microgeneration in renewables, does he agree that it does not make sense that those who can export electricity to the grid are paid less per unit than they spend when they buy electricity? That needs to be looked at. Also, the importance of energy and the environment has been mentioned already, so does he agree that there is a real logic in having those two crucial sectors covered by one Ministry?

Mr. Woolas: The machinery of government is a matter for the Prime Minister, and I am not going there. Having said that, I am grateful for what my right hon. Friend says. The whole House acknowledges the depth of his experience, so his suggestions—particularly when they are made with the force of logic that he has just displayed—will be looked at. Clearly, microgeneration has a huge part to play and, in the next five to 10 years, we as a country will see a revolution in how we approach it. Getting the market right is an essential prerequisite for that revolution.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): Following on from the previous question, my constituency is well placed for microgeneration in both hydroelectric and wind power. One of the problems that potential microgenerators face is that the local electricity transmission company, Scottish Power, is less than enthusiastic about assisting them. There is one particular scheme on which I would like the Minister's advice at some point, if I cannot get the company to see reason. All the money has been spent, the scheme has been put together, but the company has turned round and said, "The grid here won't take that amount of power." That is absolutely nonsensical. It cuts across everything the Government are trying to do and goes against common sense. If I cannot get the company to see reason, will the Minister look at the problem if I send him the papers?

Mr. Woolas: Yes, of course I will be happy to help if I can. We have a huge, £750 million programme involving the energy supply companies to encourage the diversification that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, so I will certainly look at the matter.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Government have proposed building a barrage across the River Severn to harness the second largest tidal range in the world. In welcoming my hon. Friend to his post and recognising the importance of tackling climate change and finding alternative sources of energy, may I also ask him to bear in mind the fact that the Severn is one of the most important sites in the UK for its mudflats, sandbanks and reefs and that environmental protection is also a major issue for the Government?

Mr. Woolas: My hon. Friend puts her finger on exactly the sorts of dilemmas and paradoxes that have been raised in previous questions. For the record, the Government are not proposing the barrier at the moment; we are looking at the matter and expect a report shortly. It is a question of balance. The protection of the environment at the expense of damaging the environment is one of the most difficult choices that we face in politics, which is why we must give the decision proper consideration.

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I warmly welcome the new team to their positions? We can all agree that the UK has huge untapped potential for renewable energy, but, sadly, as some Members have already commented, the renewables obligation, for all the billions that it has taken from consumers in recent years, has failed to deliver large-scale investment in a host of new technologies, such as wave and tidal power. At the other end of the spectrum, the low-carbon buildings programme to support micro-renewables is a complete shambles. However, the new energy efficiency commitment—EEC—that will replace the low-carbon buildings programme is set to be even more problematic. Can the Minister name a single innovative renewable technology that will be better supported under EEC3?

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind words in welcoming the new team. We reciprocate and welcome his new team. It is uncharitable of him to describe the scheme in the way that he has. There are many examples of improvements in the area of the low-carbon buildings programme—I have a document giving examples that runs to three pages. I do not propose to read them out, Mr. Speaker, because you would not let me, but I am more than happy to put the document on the website for hon. Members who are interested in reading in it.

Climate Change (Food Security)

4. **Tony Lloyd** (Manchester, Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had on the impact of climate change on food security. [150588]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Joan Ruddock): In 2006, DEFRA published a study on food security that concluded that the UK, as a rich and open economy, has a very robust and diverse food supply. However, the study also recognised the need to manage the various risks, including climate change, that are associated with modern food chains, as well as the food security challenges facing developing countries.

Tony Lloyd: I welcome my hon. Friend to the Front Bench. Corn prices have started to rise because land is being used for biofuels, although that might be a welcome development. However, climate change could lead not only to an increase in food prices, but to a reduction in the world's food stocks. In that context, is she satisfied that the models on which DEFRA is working are robust enough to allow us to cope with whatever climate change produces globally?

Joan Ruddock: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Nothing is absolutely certain when it comes to climate change, although we believe that our models are robust enough. Global self-sufficiency should not be taken for granted. We will continue to monitor trends, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's analysis of trends on global food production and demand. Climate change is certainly making patterns of world food production more volatile. In those circumstances, international trade can help us to pool risks and enhance food security.

I remind my hon. Friend that the UK sources food from 34 countries, with no more than 13 per cent. of imports coming from any one of them, so our risk is carefully balanced. He would be right in thinking that the risks are at their most acute in developing countries. I am delighted that DEFRA is working in both India and China to try to increase the capacity to mitigate and adapt to the impact of climate change on agriculture.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): It is estimated that 600,000 people in the world today are either underfed or undernourished. By 2050, there will be another 3 billion people—a 50 per cent. increase in the world's population. Given that the stocks of wheat and other food commodities are low, certainly compared with those in recent years, will the new Minister undertake to examine DEFRA's approach to food security and to ensure that UK farmers play their full part in feeding not only this nation, but the world? A hungry nation is not a happy nation.

Joan Ruddock: Indeed. We have to make a distinction between this country's food security and global food security. Given what I said in answer to the previous question, I think that the hon. Gentleman knows that we are pretty confident about the position here because of the diversity of sources from which we draw our food supplies and our very effective international trade. Europe as a whole is 90 per cent. self-sufficient in food. However, he is right to point out the plight of people in developing countries. The Government's record, through the Department for International Development, is second to none in giving support to developing countries, especially on agriculture, water and other ways in which we can help them to secure their future food supplies. He will know that the provision of food and the periods of hunger in developing countries are not always directly linked to food production—poverty is an enormous factor. It is for other Ministers to discuss the complexities of the situation, but we must play our part, as I believe DEFRA is doing.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see that my hon. Friend, an environmental campaigner, is now an Environment Minister. Does she agree that, whether we are considering food security or the G8 and World Bank meeting today and tomorrow in Paris on deforestation, there is a feeling that although climate change is very important, the response is fragmented? There is no cohesive and focused response globally, internationally, or even in this country. Will she work with her colleagues in her new job to ensure that we have an overarching and focused response to climate change?

Joan Ruddock: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. Through the Climate Change Bill, which the Government expect to introduce in the autumn, we will attempt to take a comprehensive approach for the first time, at least in this country. It will concentrate primarily on mitigation, but of course we will also consider adaptation. This country has played a leading role in the international community, but my hon. Friend is right to point to the fact that many people have still not grasped the absolute urgency of the issue and the fact that it is global, that we are all in this together, that the blame game does not work, and that we have to work internationally. We must put our own house in order; otherwise, we cannot possibly expect to get the international agreements that we seek.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does the Minister accept that it is an ill-conceived policy to subsidise the production of biofuels, as that forces up the price of agricultural land and so forces up the cost of food at home? That requires us to import more food from overseas. Is it not a ludicrous policy, and is it not based on a failure to understand that climate change is essentially a natural phenomenon?

Joan Ruddock: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman completely ruined his case with his final remark. He must know that the vast majority of the world scientific community is now united in believing that the effects of climate change are primarily man-made. However, as my hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has said repeatedly, it is a question of balance: we need biofuels until we can, for example, move to a new generation of vehicles that allow us to bypass the use of fossil fuels. There is a need for biofuels, and we will have to act in a sustainable way. Under the renewable transport fuel obligation, we will require obligated companies to report publicly on the life-cycle carbon savings and wider sustainability impacts of their biofuels, taking into account biodiversity and previous land use. In this country, we will ensure that we take account of all the effects of biofuels. Of course, many biofuels, such as those derived from forestry, are not alternatives to food crops. The issue is complex and it is a matter of balance, but we do need both biofuels and food crops.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (Con): I sincerely welcome the hon. Lady to her new responsibilities. We look forward to her future ministerial pronouncements on issues such as genetically modified food and nuclear power, on which she has a track record of robust opinion. I detect that her heart was not entirely in the line on food security that she read out at the beginning of her answer to the question. In 2003, her Department issued a statement that said:

"National food security is neither necessary nor is it desirable".

In 2005, the joint DEFRA-Treasury document "A Vision for the CAP" stated:

"domestic production is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for food security",

implying that if we run out of British-produced food, we can simply import it from abroad. A couple of months ago, the former Secretary of State reiterated that position, but in the light of the fact that around

the world deserts are growing, droughts are increasing, food crops are being replaced by fuel crops, and the global population is rising sharply, does she not think it is time to have another look at whether Departments should be so casual about our ability to feed ourselves?

Joan Ruddock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks; they were a bit mixed, but I can handle that. He spoke about food security, but food security is about ensuring that consumers have access to a stable and adequate supply of food. The issue of where that food comes from is not necessarily the key to food security. I accept entirely what he says about risks; as I said in previous answers, we are conscious of risks, and we must always be conscious of them. We are evaluating risks, and we remain in touch with the Food and Agriculture Organisation, but the point on UK food production is that self-sufficiency is best seen as a broad indicator of UK agricultural competitiveness, which he knows is actually extremely good. In criticising the Department, the hon. Gentleman is on the wrong foot. Food security is about ensuring that consumers have a supply. We are confident that that is the case, as I explained in my previous answers.

Supermarkets

5. **Keith Vaz** (Leicester, East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with supermarkets on the prices of foodstuffs provided by suppliers. [150591]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jonathan Shaw): Ministers have held a number of meetings with supermarkets, but not specifically on prices paid to suppliers. Supermarkets' relations with their suppliers are currently being looked at by the Competition Commission as part of its inquiry into the grocery market.

Keith Vaz: I welcome my hon. Friend's elevation from the Whips Office to the Front Bench. The next time he goes shopping in Tesco, will he reflect on the anecdotal evidence that a large number of suppliers are very concerned about the fact that the big supermarkets, Tesco included, are using their monopoly power to force down the prices of foodstuffs offered by suppliers? I know that an inquiry is under way, but will he see what he can do, as the Minister, to check on the evidence?

Jonathan Shaw: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. We need to get to the heart of the matter. There is a widely held belief that large supermarkets have a stranglehold on suppliers. That has been said with respect to dairy farmers particularly. We should support the investigation by the Competition Commission and welcome the fact that it will focus on dairy farming. My noble Friend Lord Rooker has written to the Competition Commission—we have made a submission. We will not comment on the outcome at this stage, but when the investigation is complete, we will. We look forward to the evidence that the commission presents.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome the new Minister to his position and I wish him well. I am delighted that he has mentioned dairy farming. It is a matter that I raised in the House only a few days ago. The dairy industry is in crisis. In my constituency, in the years that I have represented it, more than 50 per cent. of the dairy farms it once had are no longer in existence. One village which was all dairy, North Rode, now has no dairy farms. Will the Minister talk to the superstores and supermarkets—not just with their suppliers, but about the producers, and the prices that the producers get? We have a wonderful country for both dairying and the production of food. Let us use it to the advantage of this country and of people in other countries who are starving.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must appeal to hon. Members. They should put a supplementary question. When they speak for too long, it puts other Back Benchers at a disadvantage. That should go on the record.

Jonathan Shaw: I thank the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) for that question. When any business collapses, it is painful, but when a farm collapses it affects all of us, because farmers are the stewards of our countryside. We have seen a decrease in the dairy industry of about 6 per cent. over the past five years, but that is not specific to Britain. It has happened in Greece, Spain and Portugal. However, we are seeing price rises now at the farm gate. The dairy industry needs to move into other products, such as cheeses and organic yoghurts, as happens in Northern Ireland, where the industry relies more on the export market and prices are rising higher. We should eat British cheese—there are 750 varieties, more than in France—followed by British strawberries, preferably from the garden of England.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am about the hype of so-called organic foods by the supermarkets, which is obviously resulting in higher profits for them, but not necessarily for the growers here in Britain or in faraway places such as Kenya?

Jonathan Shaw: I welcome the point that my hon. Friend makes. We want a fair deal for farmers in Britain and for farmers in developing countries as well, so that they can profit. It is vital that labelling, particularly of organic products, is accurate. Supermarkets should be clear that when they tell the consumer that their product is organic, it should indeed be organic.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that we live in a capitalist system? Does he recognise that some of these supermarkets produce the most efficient delivery systems for foodstuffs in the world? Does he recognise that to try to change that philosophy is probably a bit more than he and his Department are capable of? Does he recognise that free trade—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Jonathan Shaw: I always recognise my hon. Friend. I take on board his points, but I think it is important that we get the balance right in the relationship between the supplier and the supermarket, as both require certainty and flexibility in today's world.

Equine Welfare

6. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): When he expects to introduce (a) licensing of livery yards and (b) regulations on tethering as provided for by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. [150593]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jonathan Shaw): It is the Government's intention to introduce secondary legislation on livery yards, and a code of practice will be introduced as soon as possible and in line with resources.

Mr. Robertson: That was not a terribly illuminating response, I am afraid. May I point out to the Minister that as many riding establishments are licensed, it seems correct that livery yards should be licensed in the same way? Does he intend that those approved by the British Horse Society should still require a licence from the local authority? With regard to tethering, is it his intention that the travelling population should comply with the rules that he introduces? Would he be prepared to attend the all-party group on the horse, which I have the honour of chairing, to discuss these matters?

Jonathan Shaw: To answer the last question first—yes. Also, we are considering the code for tethering. I take on board the hon. Gentleman's points about the travelling community. We do not want horses to endure tethering for long periods. As for introducing licensing, he knows that we had to make a decision during the passage of the Animal Welfare Bill, and we chose to deal with circuses and greyhounds. We are committed to introducing legislation for livery yards, but there are always competing demands on time.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): When the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee took evidence on the draft Animal Welfare Bill, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals told us that there were several thousand complaints a year about incorrect tethering, illegal grazing and subsequent straying, which has caused significant problems in counties such as mine. Will the Minister consider the RSPCA's recommendation that the Government work much more closely with local authorities, particularly, as the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) said, in areas where there are significant encampments of the travelling community?

Jonathan Shaw: I will most certainly do that, and I thank my hon. Friend for his question.

Flooding

7. **Mrs. Ann Cryer** (Keighley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to draw lessons from the recent severe flooding; and if he will make a statement. [150594]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): We have set up a wide-ranging review to identify lessons to be learned from the recent flooding to help us to manage and respond to such events in future. We aim to publish initial findings by the end of the year and subsequently a formal Government report.

Mrs. Cryer: May I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his recent appointment and on the high-quality nature of his team?

Will my right hon. Friend report to the House any discussions that he has been having with representatives of British insurers regarding the recent flooding? I have in mind the difficulties that I experienced in my constituency in 2002, when one elderly lady was rendered homeless for 12 months because a big insurance company forced her to accept the lowest bid, which meant bringing in cowboys, and she had a very unhappy time.

Hilary Benn: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words. I join her in welcoming the new ministerial team at DEFRA. I am greatly looking forward to working with my colleagues.

I have already spoken to the Association of British Insurers on the issues that my hon. Friend raises, and I know of the efforts that insurance companies are making to get round to visiting people and processing claims as quickly as possible, including changing some of the arrangements whereby they would usually require more than one quote. There will be big demands on the building and repairs industry to deal with the problems that people have experienced. My hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government, who is leading the recovery group, is also talking to the ABI about these issues.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his post. Will he commit to ensuring that farmers such as Peter Vaughan in my constituency, who has lost 150 acres of potatoes, are guaranteed at least a large percentage of their single farm payment by Christmas? Many other members of the rural community have lost crops because of flooding, and constituents of mine in Tenbury Wells were flooded again this week. What can he do for Andrea Harrison and Mike Button of Phaze Computer Services who, despite the fact that they are not located in the rural community but in the more urban parts of my constituency, are very worried about their business?

Hilary Benn: I am acutely conscious of, and have discussed, the problems facing farmers in many constituencies, not least at last week's Great Yorkshire show. Two issues were raised with me of which the hon. Gentleman will be aware: the cross-compliance arrangements, which normally prevent farmers from going on to waterlogged land, and the use of set-aside land for grazing and foraging. I went away to consider them, and within 24 hours we lifted the rules on cross-compliance and waterlogged land until the end of this month to enable farmers to get on to the land and do what they can to rescue their crops. By notifying the Rural Payments Agency, they are able to use set-aside land for grazing and foraging—unless the agency says there is a difficulty—in recognition of the fact that the land they would otherwise use is currently underwater.

We made those changes in direct response to representations made to me. We set the RPA a target for 2007—it having achieved the target of paying 96 per cent. of the money due by 30 June by reaching a figure of 98 per cent.—of paying 75 per cent. of the amount due by the end of March and 90 per cent. by the end of May. We shall look further at the position in the autumn.

I met the agency's chief executive yesterday; I recognise that the service it has provided has not been acceptable, but things are improving. I am determined that we shall maintain that improvement and I am grateful to agency staff for their efforts.

Single Farm Payment Scheme

8. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): If he will make a statement on the operation of the single farm payment scheme. [150596]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): I reported to the House on 2 July that, as at 30 June, the Rural Payments Agency had paid out 98 per cent. of the estimated total funds, thus meeting its target for this year. The agency continues to work on the remaining single payment scheme claims, including cases where entitlements may need to be adjusted.

Ann Winterton: The Secretary of State has acknowledged the mind-boggling incompetence of the RPA in the past, and we look forward to dramatic improvements. Is he aware of increased problems for those who farm on both sides of the Welsh border, owing to a failure to think through the implications of devolved agriculture for cross-border farms? Why are English farmers further disadvantaged by the fact that modulation is much higher in England, and in Scotland too, amounting to almost 10 per cent. of entitlement?

Hilary Benn: On top of compulsory modulation under the common agricultural policy, we have decided to have a greater degree of voluntary modulation. I think that that is the right policy. I shall go away and consider the specific issue the hon. Lady raises about farmers farming on both sides of the border.

Every Member recognises that this has not been a happy episode for the RPA, but I hope that the hon. Lady will acknowledge the steps that have been taken to try to improve the service. We should encourage agency staff to continue that work, and my noble Friend Lord Rooker has been holding surgeries at which Members can talk to him about individual cases. Those are continuing. I say to all hon. Members whose farmer constituents are experiencing difficulties, that they can talk to us about individual cases, and we shall do our best to sort them out.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Domestic Violence

14. **Mrs. Joan Humble** (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to raise awareness of Crown Prosecution Service measures to tackle domestic violence, with particular reference to Blackpool, North and Fleetwood. [150577]

The Solicitor-General (Vera Baird): Yesterday, we published the Crown Prosecution Service's annual snapshot survey of domestic violence cases, which shows that convictions are 66 per cent.—up by 20 per cent. since 2003, with 6 per cent. fewer cases being discontinued—and the number of cases recorded has doubled since 2002. There has been some success, and the latest figure suggests that complainants are starting to believe that they will be made safe and helped if they complain, and are therefore coming forward more. That should help to raise awareness in my hon. Friend's constituency, and elsewhere.

Mrs. Humble: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that reply and commend her and the Department on the success that they are achieving. The local Crown Prosecution Service in Blackpool—and, indeed, across Lancashire—is working closely with a variety of agencies to support the victims of domestic violence. However, some people still do not realise that changes have taken place and remain worried that perhaps they will not receive the sympathetic hearing that my hon. and learned Friend mentioned. What further steps can she take, working through a variety of agencies, to offer reassurances so that victims come forward and are heard, and that prosecutions take place?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is a lack of confidence among complainants, approximately 94 per cent. of whom are women because, historically when they have come forward, they have not been taken seriously. My hon. Friend is doing a good job of publicising the changes at the moment. The fact that we label courts as domestic violence specialist courts makes it clear that they are places to which people have recourse.

However, the CPS has in recent years worked overwhelmingly with local non-governmental organisations and told them the sort of services it can offer. They are likely to be the place of first resort for domestic violence complainants if they come forward and I therefore hope that there is a continuum of information through that mechanism.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Female genital mutilation is one of the most grievous forms of domestic violence in this country. Does it not shock and concern the Solicitor-General that, despite legislation that was passed in 2003 to prevent it, only one person has been investigated? As far I can discover through freedom of information requests, not one person has been prosecuted for that most grievous and wicked crime.

The Solicitor-General: I am glad to have the hon. Gentleman's support in our attempts to tackle that grievous and often hidden crime. It is not easy to tackle—it is not easy to bring complainants forward or deal with them when they do come forward. However, we have no lack of political will to do that. If the hon. Gentleman can help us, I would be pleased to meet him and discuss the matter further. It will be a priority for my noble Friend the Attorney-General and me.

Disclosure (Offenders)

16. **Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If she will discuss with the senior presiding judge the guidance on disclosure to courts of information on prolific and priority offenders. [150580]

The Solicitor-General: I do not currently have plans to discuss the guidance, which has recently been reviewed, with the senior presiding judge. It is not the label "prolific and priority offender" that is important to the court when it sentences, but its function in ensuring that the defendant's full offending history and the risks of reoffending are before the court so that it can sentence appropriately.

Mr. Hollobone: I urge the Solicitor-General to reconsider speaking to the presiding judge because the problem in Kettering and north Northamptonshire is that the police catch the prolific and priority offenders, bring them before the courts, but all too often they are let back out on the streets on bail, only to reoffend immediately. The police are tearing their hair out, and I suggest that it is up to her to ascertain whether she can persuade the Crown Prosecution Service and the Courts Service to do something about that.

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to tell me that such a problem was certainly perceived in his constituency. A "premium service" has been set up in the criminal justice system generally to deal with PPOs. Like many criminal justice issues, it is intended to be co-ordinated through the local criminal justice boards. The intention is that the police and the CPS share the targets for tackling PPOs, and the premium service consists of getting people to court more quickly, increasing multi-agency co-operation and listing cases quickly so that the sort of problem that the hon. Gentleman raises should not arise. We can only do our utmost to ensure that all the evidence of the local harm that PPOs cause is before the courts so that they can be rigorously sentenced.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I welcome the steps that the Solicitor-General and her predecessors have taken, but it is important that the information is accurate. Will she assure hon. Members that, when multi agencies approach the subject, the information gathering is done efficiently and the information is accurate and disclosed to the defendant?

The Solicitor-General: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. One reliable way of ensuring that the information that comes before the court is accurate is to ensure that it is agreed, as it were, by both parties to the case. As I have said, the CPS has been marked over the past few years by its ability to work closely with, and to enlist the support of, NGOs and other public sector and criminal agencies, to ensure that it makes progress in priority areas such as PPOs. Of course the CPS has a duty to try to ensure that the information that comes from those outside sources is accurate before it puts it before the courts.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): The Solicitor-General will be aware that the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone) raised is about concrete examples brought to him of what one sometimes hears anecdotally from elsewhere. Is not the basic problem, if it exists in this form, nothing to do with whether there are prolific or priority offenders, but simply failures by the CPS in presenting cases in court to bring to the court's attention previous convictions and previous breaches of bail? It is difficult to gauge the extent to which that might be happening, but will the Solicitor-General consider whether the Crown Prosecution Service should conduct a review of how such information is presented to the court? If my hon. Friend is right, something that can be easily rectified is not being addressed, but if it were, it would go a long way towards dealing with such cases much better.

The Solicitor-General: I take from that what I hope and expect is support from the hon. Gentleman for saying that it would not help to put the label "PPO" before the court. What is imperative is to ensure that the full history of offending is put before the court. The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone) has raised an important point. We will look across the board at how well we are doing that work. If I found deficits, I would have no hesitation in asking the inspectorate to look at the position.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): The debate so far illustrates how well the system can work when there are guidelines in place for which the Solicitor-General is accountable to the House. Does she accept that there is a case for maintaining that system, with the Solicitor-General and the Attorney-General on one side and the prosecution service on the other, so that instead of discussions and instructions on specific individual prosecutions, the relationship is always one where the Law Officers give guidelines to prosecutors?

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman and I were both involved in a debate about the roles of the prosecutors and the Law Officers respectively as recently as Monday. I believe that the Constitutional Affairs Select Committee is due to publish a report on the issue imminently, or that it has just published one. We shall publish a consultation document, I hope next week, which will look at the role of the Law Officers in that and a number of other regards. That is consonant with "The Governance of Britain", which the Prime Minister announced a few weeks ago. We intend to encourage all sorts of participation throughout the House of Commons and elsewhere to ensure that we get the model for the Law Officers right for the 21st century.

Targets (Police and CPS)

17. **Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): What steps she has taken to ensure that targets set for the Crown Prosecution Service do not conflict with targets set for police forces in England and Wales. [150581]

The Solicitor-General: The Law Officers agree public service agreement performance targets for the criminal justice system with the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor. Common performance targets help to ensure that there are no conflicts between the targets for the police and those for the Crown Prosecution Service, or at least minimum ones.

Mark Pritchard: With respect to the Solicitor-General, I beg to differ on that point. Does she share my concern that often, and mysteriously, the targets set for the police require a higher evidence threshold than those set for the Crown Prosecution Service? Police forces such as West Mercia work hard to bring criminals before the courts, only to find that they are put at the bottom of

the pile because the CPS has another target to meet, and that, whatever the evidence produced by the police, it is not brought before to court, meaning that criminals go free.

The Solicitor-General: Quite honestly, I do not think so. The levels of evidence required before the Crown Prosecution Service will bring a prosecution are extremely well known. They have been in place in the code for Crown prosecutors for many years and were very clear even before that was drafted. They are well known to the police. There can be no real difference in the standards required of the two organisations. Local criminal justice boards ought to ensure that there is good co-ordination between police and prosecutors across a whole range of issues—indeed, across all issues. If there are specific difficulties in the hon. Gentleman's area that he wants to draw to my attention, I hope that he will do so. I will ensure that they are forwarded.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Rating (Empty Properties) Act 2007
Appropriation (No. 2) Act 2007
Finance Act 2007
Mental Health Act 2007
Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007
Vehicle Registration Marks Act 2007
Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007
Parliament (Joint Departments) Act 2007
Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act 2007
Whitehaven Harbour Act 2007
London Local Authorities Act 2007

Business of the House

11.36 am

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): The business for next week will be:

MONDAY 23 JULY—Motion to approve the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, followed by remaining stages of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill [*Lords*]. It is also expected that there will be a statement on housing.

TUESDAY 24 JULY—Opposition day [18th allotted day]. There will be a debate entitled "Government's Handling of the Penal System" and a debate entitled "Attack on Global Poverty". Both debates arise on an Opposition motion, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

WEDNESDAY 25 JULY—Consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve the appointment of the Chairman to the Statistics Board, followed by motions relating to Select Committee changes, followed by consideration of the draft legislative programme on a motion for the Adjournment of the House, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 26 JULY—Motion on the summer recess Adjournment.

I should also like to remind Members that they may table named day questions on 3, 5 and 10 September. They will be for answer on 10, 12 and 17 September. The Government may also issue written ministerial statements on those latter dates.

The provisional business for the week commencing 8 October will include:

MONDAY 8 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill.

I should also like to remind the House that the state opening of Parliament will be on Tuesday 6 November.

Mrs. May: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for giving us the future business.

Yesterday, the BBC suspended all phone-in competitions after it found out that yet more had been rigged. As our national public service broadcaster, the BBC has a duty to restore public trust. May we have a debate in Government time on the BBC?

This week, the Institute for Public Policy Research called for an amnesty for illegal immigrants. Such a policy would be wrong in principle and wrong in practice, and would reflect the Government's failure to get a grip on illegal immigration, yet, during the deputy leadership campaign, when asked about such an amnesty, the right hon. and learned Lady said:

"People who have worked hard here and paid their taxes should be allowed to stay."

May we have a debate in Government time on the need to secure Britain's borders?

The right hon. and learned Lady has just announced that the Government's Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, which was due to receive its Second Reading next Monday, has now been deferred until October, just a

[Mrs. May]

couple of weeks before the end of the parliamentary Session. We know that that significant piece of legislation will change in the autumn. Its deferral is an abuse of the carry-over procedure and shows disdain for Parliament. Why will the Government not be honest and introduce the Bill in the next parliamentary Session?

Yesterday, in Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that

"the Home Secretary will consult on whether... cannabis should be moved from class C to class B."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 268.]

It was the present Government who reclassified cannabis from B to C in the first place, but we will support their U-turn. For the second week in a row, the Prime Minister has announced a reversal of policy in an answer to a planted question rather than in an oral statement that allows hon. Members to put questions to a Minister. That betrays a disregard for hon. Members. Why was this change not announced properly by the Home Secretary in a statement?

Yesterday, the Prime Minister also confirmed that Parliamentary Private Secretaries can sit on Select Committees. He gave the feeble excuse that they will not sit on Committees that scrutinised their Departments, but he thinks it acceptable for Members who work for Ministers, and therefore for the Executive, to sit on Select Committees whose job it is to scrutinise the Executive. That betrays a disregard for Select Committees, so can we have a debate on the future of such Committees?

Under this Government, 125,000 people have lost their savings because their pension fund went bust. We proposed a lifeboat fund properly to compensate those who lost out through no fault of their own. The Prime Minister had Labour MPs whipped into voting against the lifeboat. Some Labour Members agreed with us and the other place agreed with us. Now, however, Ministers have invoked parliamentary privilege to stop the debate and limit compensation. So much for respecting Parliament and so much for helping those who have lost their pensions. Will the Pensions Secretary make an urgent statement on why he has used parliamentary privilege in this way?

The Prime Minister says that he wants to make Parliament the crucible of our political life, but those examples—from just this last week—show nothing but disrespect for hon. Members, disregard for parliamentary procedure and disdain for parliamentary scrutiny. Is it not clear that putting Parliament first is just a new type of spin?

Ms Harman: The paper on the governance of Britain sets out a number of ways in which we were moving forward and working with both sides of the House on ensuring that we strengthen its important role. If the right hon. Lady wishes us to consider any additional individual points, we are happy to so do. Our determination is to strengthen the House's role, as we believe that strong Government works best when held to account by a strong Parliament.

On the right hon. Lady's individual issues, she first raised the question of the BBC. Both I and the Government are strong supporters of the BBC—*[Interruption.]* Absolutely, we are strong supporters. It is important that the BBC retains the trust of all its viewers, but the particular issue that the right hon. Lady raised does not apply only to the BBC; as Michael Grade said, it applies across all broadcasting companies. The matter could be discussed further at Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions on Monday or perhaps debated on the Adjournment.

The right hon. Lady raised the position of those whose immigration status may have expired and of people who have come to this country without proper permission. It has been the policy of successive Governments to look at individual cases and judge whether it would be right to exercise discretion to allow people to stay. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) raised such an individual case in Prime Minister's questions yesterday. As well as having a policy that should be enforced firmly and fairly, we believe it right to look into individual cases. Following the particular case raised yesterday, the Prime Minister has agreed to defer the deportation. As I say, it is right to reflect on individual cases in that way.

On the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, with the interim report of Sir Ronnie Flanagan coming out in the summer, it might be better, as has been suggested, for Second Reading to take place the other side of the recess, if the Government are to be able to bring forward further issues in that Bill.

The right hon. Lady raised the question of the cannabis review. There is new evidence that the cannabis used, particularly by young people, is stronger than it used to be, and therefore more dangerous—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must allow the Leader of the House to reply to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). *[Interruption.]* Order.

Ms Harman: As well as the evidence that the cannabis used particularly by young people is stronger than it used to be, there is more evidence of the link between use of that strong cannabis by young people and serious mental health problems. That issue has been raised with me by the Institute of Psychiatry at the Maudsley hospital in my constituency. If new evidence emerges, it is right that the Government listen, look at the evidence and publish a review document.

The right hon. Lady also made a point about Parliamentary Private Secretaries. We need to recognise the important role of Select Committees, and we all support their work. Under the previous Government, PPSs did, from time to time, sit on Select Committees. Nobody in the House would think it right for a PPS to sit on a Select Committee for their own Department. The right hon. Lady will know, however, that PPSs are not members of the Government. She is perhaps asking us to look afresh at a policy introduced by her Government and continued by this Government.

On pensions, we need to remember that those people whose occupational schemes went bust received no help at all under the previous Government. We have gone a long way to set up financial support systems for those who have paid into pension schemes throughout their working life and whose schemes have gone bust. We are putting forward costed proposals, which we know we can afford, to move from a figure of 80 per cent. of the core pension to 90 per cent.

I am not quite sure what point the right hon. Lady is making about parliamentary privilege. If she is talking about the House of Lords overriding the will of the elected House, I do not agree with her. If she is talking about something else, one of my hon. Friends will have to advise me as to what she is getting at. I say to the House, and to the right hon. Lady, that Members of the House should be able to represent the interests of their constituents and to hold the Government to account. As Leader of the House, that is what I am determined to ensure.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 1856?

[That this House is concerned at the enormous potential expenditure in taking the academy programme to 400 schools with its heavy subsidies to miscellaneous private sponsors provided on the basis of unproven, possibly unjustified, assumptions about resulting improvements to education in disadvantaged areas; urges the establishment of an independent inquiry to evaluate the performance of academies, compared to modernised state schools to assess whether any improvements are more than a temporary Hawthorne effect, to assess the effects of academies on neighbouring schools, and the overall performance of the education authority, to examine the value for money of academies as opposed to spending the same sums on secondary schools more generally, and to look at ways to merge the two systems, academies and local authority schools in order to ensure the unified development of the system and avoid further divisions in public education.]

May I also draw her attention to early-day motion 605? Those two early-day motions express the growing concern in the House about the apparent headlong rush by the Government into promoting academies, which are now to number 400. The construction of such academies appears to have no ultimate cost, apart from a global figure of £35,000 to £40,000, and there is no real evidence about their efficacy. Will she draw the attention of the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families to those important matters, and arrange a debate as early as possible?

Ms Harman: I will draw my hon. Friend's comments to the attention of my right hon. Friend. He will also have an opportunity to raise such issues on Thursday. We are all concerned to see that every area has good local schools, which have proper resources and are properly accountable. I pay tribute to the Peckham academy in my constituency, where standards have been improved for the young people in that school.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): The Leader of the House announced that on Monday there would be a debate on what was originally a private Member's Bill on forced marriages introduced by Lord Lester of Herne Hill. It is a Bill that we welcome in this House. Will the right hon. and learned Lady use that step as a welcome precedent for making sure that there are other opportunities from Monday to Thursday for private Members' Bills that start either here or in the other place to be debated so that they have the chance of fair consideration, which has not been the case in the past?

The Leader of the House has announced that we will have a debate on housing. Will it also be an opportunity to debate planning, which is often linked with it? Will we be able to debate whether the Prime Minister has pre-empted the consultation on a new super-quango to take major infrastructure planning decisions? It is a controversial issue and there are still meant to be some weeks of discussion and consultation, yet the Prime Minister indicated last week that he might have come to a final view.

As for Select Committees, in addition to the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) from the Conservative Front Bench, would it not be fair that regional Select Committees reflect the balance of the political representation in each region? That must be the right way of doing it. Will the Leader of the House reflect on whether, if we are to have proper representation, even within the funny system that we have for electing us all to the House, we should have at least that fairness when the new Committees are set up after next week?

Given that the Leader of the House has clearly accepted that it would be inappropriate to consider the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill before the summer recess, may I strongly back the request to accept the fact that it would be illogical to bring it back in October when the Government intend to amend it in November? We ought to consider the Bill in November in its final form so that we can debate what the Government are proposing.

On the matters that are not in the right hon. and learned Lady's statement, we receive a welcome indication now of what statements are to be made to the House. Today, for example, we have a statement on Lords reform. I gather that there are to be further statements before we break. Could we hear from the Leader of the House what they are to be about so that people can plan and everyone knows what is coming? If we are to have Government statements, may we have maximum notice rather than wake up in the morning and only then know what is coming in the afternoon? May we have statements rather than just veiled hints on changes of policy such as on casinos and drugs? Can they be absolutely backed up by guarantees that the policies will be evidence-based rather than prejudice-based?

I am sad to say that probably many more people take part in interactive programmes and phone-ins on broadcast media shows than watch Question Time in this place on their televisions. I hope that that will change. May we have a debate about all media and all programmes, as the Leader of the House said? It is probably the case that there has been fiddling of the system by all those who broadcast such programmes. We really need to clean it up once and for all.

Ms Harman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the important provisions in the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill. He was right to say that the Bill came from a private Member of the House of Lords. There is always the opportunity for the Government to take forward private Member's business on that basis. We will keep under review the points that he made about finding time to do so.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned planning and housing. I said in my business statement that there would be a

[Ms Harman]

statement on housing on Monday. We all recognise that planning is integral to our ability to provide to rent and to buy at affordable prices the homes that local people need. There will be an opportunity for him to raise that point on Monday.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Select Committees. Obviously, their membership will be decided in the usual way. I think that it makes sense for the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill to be considered the other side of the recess. It does not make sense to withdraw it from the House and reintroduce it. The Bill contains important measures that we need to get on with. I responded to points made on that last week, and they were part of our consideration about moving the Bill to the other side of the recess.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about advance information to be given to the House in relation to statements. Obviously, we do not want to announce firmly the day that a statement is to be made and then find that for other reasons it is subject to change, but it would be helpful for hon. Members to have some idea what issues are likely to form the basis of statements, so I will see what we can do on that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the concern about the BBC and recognised rightly that this is a serious matter for all the broadcast media. Ofcom is also involved and I have no doubt that the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, which has looked at the issue in the past, will reconsider it.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): When can we have a debate about arms exports? I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is aware of the report published by Amnesty and other organisations this week about the possibility of India supplying Burma with advanced light helicopters, which are built containing components made in the EU and the UK, despite the EU arms embargo as a result of the appalling history of human rights in Burma. I have been contacted this week by a number of my constituents about this issue. How can we take it forward?

Ms Harman: First, I pay tribute to Amnesty for the work that it has done on this report and for all the important work that it does. The House may be aware that the Indian Government have denied that they have sold the helicopters to Burma, but it is something that we are concerned about and that we have raised with our partners in the European Union. We are all appalled at the human rights abuses in Burma, and want to work as hard as we can to put pressure on it.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Could the Leader of the House please arrange for an early statement by the Secretary of State for Justice, beyond that which he is going to make this afternoon, so that he can give rather wider publicity to the contents of a letter that he seems to have written only to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) about the Government's policy on the provision and commissioning of probation services? In his letter of 17 July he said:

"The Bill transfers the statutory duty for making arrangements for the provision of probation services to the Secretary of State. This does not mean that the Secretary of State will commission everything directly. ... The Bill also enables the Secretary of State to delegate this responsibility to the probation trust, or another lead provider, and this is what will happen in practice."

That did not come out very clearly in yesterday's debate. It ought to be in the Bill. Could the right hon. and learned Lady invite the Secretary of State for Justice, the former Leader of the House, to come here and put on record what he said in the letter that he sent only to the hon. Member for Walthamstow?

Ms Harman: I think that that was exactly the subject of the debate on the Offender Management Bill. It seems to me that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice has set that position out. So, as I see it, he is not giving new information on a selective basis to one hon. Member. It is the position as it is in the Bill.

I perhaps failed to answer the question asked by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead about parliamentary privilege in relation to pensions. It is of course the case that this House, as the elected House, rightly reserves to itself decisions on financial matters. No hon. Member in this House would think it right for us to allow the House of Lords to make decisions on financial matters. If that is the parliamentary privilege that the right hon. Lady was talking about, I think that we should stand by it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): While any change about recalling Parliament is to be welcomed—I remember what the Prime Minister said—may I ask the question that the Opposition parties are not willing to put to my right hon. and learned Friend? Why is Parliament closing down next week for 11 weeks? Is there real justification for such a long break, even though constituency work is obviously undertaken? A shorter break would certainly be much appreciated.

Ms Harman: I am sure that my hon. Friend would not want to convey the impression that there is not a great deal of constituency work going on while the House is not sitting. There is a constant balance between hon. Members working in their constituencies and properly holding the Government to account. We need to do both. My hon. Friend will know that we have tried different ways to get around this. We have to accommodate the party conferences, but we have introduced the opportunity for Parliament to scrutinise the Executive by asking questions during the recess. That is a welcome step forward.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne) (Con): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 1952?

[That this House acknowledges the distinguished service of the hon. Member for Calder Valley to the Council of Europe over nine years; applauds her contribution to the work of the Social Health and Family Affairs Committee, often acting as rapporteur on key human rights issues; recognises her pioneering work on the Equal Opportunities Committee and on the Sub Committee on Children and Sub Committee on Violence Against Women; pays tribute to her abilities in her role as Chair of the Labour Group; and wishes her well in the forthcoming election for Leader of the Labour Group on the UK Delegation to the Council of Europe.]

It refers to the position of leader of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe. The motion states that there

is to be a contest for the position between the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) and the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty). I understand that the election is to take place next week. As the Leader of the House will know, the Council of Europe is a guardian of democracy and, as she will also know, the UK delegation is an all-party delegation. Will she assure the House that in the interests of democracy every member of the delegation will be entitled to vote in that election next week?

Ms Harman: I am sure that that will be the case.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend consider a debate on the role of contractors in the building industry, such as Lovell, which has done a considerable amount of valuable regeneration work in my constituency, paid for mainly out of the public purse? However, those large contractors are impervious to looking after the individuals who take on the homes that they have constructed. Lovell has an appalling record on rectifying the faults in those homes. Given that public money goes into making Lovell large profits, should we not have a debate about public control of those large contractors and how they fulfil their obligations to the people that we want to help?

Ms Harman: We want more homes, and more affordable homes, to rent and to buy; and to make sure that they are of the highest quality, including to the highest environmental standards. My hon. Friend has raised an important point that I shall bring to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): The Government have caused some confusion with the announcement about changes to public service agreement targets. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an oral statement on the issue of adoption targets and whether they are to be cancelled? Roughly between 15 and 20 children are wrongfully adopted every week and it would be useful to clarify the situation before the recess.

Ms Harman: We want to ensure that those children who cannot be with their parents because of the risk of neglect or abuse are properly taken into care. If a permanent placement can be found for such children with a family by way of adoption, we would all agree that that is much better than leaving them in a children's home or moving them from one foster carer to another. On targets, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary is reviewing targets. We want to make sure that we do not have more than are necessary and that they are mutually consistent, but we must not lose sight of the fact that people want the Government and public services to do important things. If a target is able to focus work in that respect, that is what we should do. One example is cutting waiting times for hospital treatment.

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): May I congratulate the Government on scrapping regional assemblies, on introducing regional Select Committees and on the proposals for regional questions and a regional Minister? Those are welcome changes, and something for which many Members have called for a long time. Can I ask about the time scales? When will the regional Select Committees be up and running? How will regional questions operate? Will they be held in this Chamber or in Westminster Hall?

Ms Harman: As I announced, the motions relating to Select Committee changes will be discussed on Wednesday. I thank my hon. Friend for her welcome for the work of the Government in focusing on the regions. One of the reasons why we have seen consistent and sustained economic growth is that we have focused on concerns region by region. That is what we continue to do to make the work of the Government in each region more accountable.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): May we have an early debate on the Government's strategic objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan? Many of us believe that the cost in terms of lives and casualties in Iraq outweighs any political or military objective that we can reasonably obtain and, in Helmand province in Afghanistan, we have taken to ourselves objectives on which we cannot succeed, given the existing troop levels, and the casualties are too high.

Ms Harman: As we are nearly into the recess, I cannot offer the right hon. and learned Gentleman a debate next week. Obviously it is too late to apply for a debate on the Adjournment, on which he could raise this issue. I will bring his points to the attention of ministerial colleagues; this is something to which we will no doubt return in the autumn.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend urge the relevant Department to undertake to commission some work to determine the extent of international cold-calling, whereby UK businesses using overseas call centres escape the telephone preference scheme and cause significant distress to our constituents?

Ms Harman: I will draw this to the attention of my ministerial colleague. This is a matter for Ofcom, but it is also a question of social and public responsibility. British companies need to act responsibly in this country and abroad and certainly should not be able to get around any provision designed to help consumers and the public.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): The BBC used to be, and should be, a cherished and trusted national institution. May we have a debate about the recent disappointments and, in particular, the BBC's pro-European bias, which flies in the face of the fact that 70 per cent. of the British public want looser ties with Europe?

Ms Harman: The BBC has recognised the need to rebuild trust and is still a very much cherished institution. On Europe, we all recognise that there are some issues on which we cannot work individually as a country. We cannot do as much as we need to do on climate change acting on our own; we cannot do as much as we want to do on international development and the menace of human trafficking acting on our

[Ms Harman]

own. Therefore, in the interests of this country and the world, we have to act with our European colleagues.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) has secured a timely debate in Westminster Hall next Wednesday on UK relations with Russia. May we have a written statement before then about the extraordinary circumstances in which a man was arrested by the Metropolitan police and accused of conspiracy to prepare the murder of Mr. Berezovsky? The Metropolitan police took the man to Heathrow, put him on a plane and said, "Shoo, shoo, go away." Against the backdrop of last Monday's events, that is an extraordinary situation and Parliament should be told what is going on. It seems that Berezovsky is running this country, rather than being a visitor. It is now time for a degree of candour in advance of the debate next Wednesday. Why was this man put on an aeroplane after we had heard all the nonsense on Monday about the rule of law? Discuss.

Ms Harman: I am here to explain the business of the House. My hon. Friend has raised the question of the debate in Westminster Hall next week, which Members can attend if they want. Allegations of criminal activity are independently investigated by the police. I am sure that my hon. Friend will acknowledge that the police exercise their powers independently, and not only would nobody try to lean on them—it would be wrong if they did—but they would protest and resist if they were lent on. If there were sufficient evidence for a prosecution, it would be passed to the Crown Prosecution Service, which would decide—again independently—whether a prosecution should be pursued. If a non-British national is involved and the CPS wants to bring them to justice in this country, it will notify the immigration authorities that it wishes a stay on any deportation proceedings. I am confident that that is what happened in this case. Allegations have been made, but I can assure the House that the independence of the police and the prosecution service obtain.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): We need a statement on the Government's drugs strategy, especially after this morning's events—Ministers were falling over themselves to admit to past cannabis indiscretions. Does the right hon. and learned Lady agree that no one cares about what we MPs got up to when we were students, and that such events only serve to take us further away from having a grown-up, sensible debate about drugs in our community?

Ms Harman: A grown-up, sensible debate is exactly what we should have, and the Home Secretary is taking that goal forward. We must look at the evidence and examine how best to use the considerable additional resources that we have made available for dealing with drug abuse problems. I pay tribute to those who do the difficult work of helping drug addicts and abusers. We cannot have a grown-up, sensible debate if it involves party political point-scoring. We will issue a consultation document, and any proposals that arise from it will be brought before the House.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): You, Mr. Speaker, more than anyone will know how long the House has waited for a debate in Government time on Zimbabwe. We will have such a debate this afternoon, but is the Leader of the House aware that the Foreign Secretary will not attend it despite the fact that it has been in his diary since before the last reshuffle and he is not away from London? As there is no Minister for Africa, his absence insults Parliament and the people of Zimbabwe.

Ms Harman: I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend has done in raising the terrible situation in Zimbabwe. I know that she will wish to contribute to the debate, and it is important that it is taking place. Members should come to the Chamber and listen to the speech of the Minister who attends it, as what is important is what they say and whether it addresses the key problems.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): May I refer to a question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) on the Pensions Bill? The Leader of the House has announced the consideration of Lords amendments for next week. Many Members were hoping to have another opportunity to vote on Lords amendments relating to the lifeboat funds. I understand that that will not now be possible because at a late stage in the progress of the Bill and after the Government have been much criticised, they have precluded any further discussion by invoking financial privilege. How does the Leader of the House reconcile that with all the warm words that have been uttered about restoring power to Parliament?

Ms Harman: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is a great champion of the parliamentary process and of the right of this House to hold the Executive to account, so I am not sure what he is suggesting. Is he suggesting that we allow a decision to be made in the other place that should rightly be made in this House? We must ensure that this House has supremacy when there is disagreement.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): I wish to ask the Leader of the House about the dagging of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions. She will be aware that DEFRA has a wide range of responsibilities. I have listened carefully to what she has said about transparency and holding Departments to account, but if she looks at today's Order Paper she will see that DEFRA questions have been docked of at least 10 minutes. Will she use the recess time to think of a way in which big Departments might receive proper scrutiny and a full amount of Question Time—if possible even more than the hour that we used to get?

Ms Harman: Yes, we will look into the allocation of time for departmental questions; as there have been machinery of government changes, we must look again at that. We will bring forward proposals on it when the House returns in the autumn.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House had a chance to look at early-day motion 1949, asking for support for the report of the cross-party group on childhood leukaemia and electric and magnetic fields, which has over the past year been ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate)?

[That this House welcomes the launch of the July 2007 Report of the Cross-party Inquiry into Childhood Leukaemia and Extremely Low Frequency Electric and Magnetic Fields (ELF EMF); supports the recommendations of the inquiry which includes a moratorium on the building of new homes and schools within 60 metres of existing high voltage overhead transmission lines, increased funding for research into the link between childhood leukaemia and EMF, the implementation of the Government's SAGE report recommendations, and the protection of homeowners by providing them with information about the levels of EMF in any property; and calls upon the Government to take into account the dangers of EMF in transmission and distribution in its Energy Review and on the Department for Communities and Local Government to take all the inquiry's recommendations into consideration in planning for all new homes and schools.]

Will the Leader of the House find time to get Ministers in the appropriate Department to look at our recommendations, some of which are pressing? We are calling for a moratorium on the building of houses within 60 m of pylons. Will she also ensure that there is dialogue with the Scottish Executive, which is considering the proposal for the Beauly to Denny supergrid? It will be a 400 kW grid and we are calling for a zone around it of 200 m in which schools and houses should not be built. That is a pressing matter. Many children have died from childhood leukaemia that is clearly linked to the proximity of their homes to pylons.

Ms Harman: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he does as part of the cross-party group on childhood leukaemia, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) on his chairmanship of that group. It is a difficult subject on which the science is advancing. I will draw this matter to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): Government figures released this week show that robbery offences in Norfolk have risen by a shocking 24 per cent., which is the highest increase in the country. I have consistently called on the Government to provide adequate funding for the Norfolk constabulary. Do not these figures show that the Government have failed to provide Norfolk with sufficient resources for us to have enough of a police presence on our streets? Because of the figures, will the right hon. and learned Lady give time for a debate after the summer recess on rural policing?

Ms Harman: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that there will be a statement on crime reduction in about an hour's time, when he might raise his point. Under this Government there have been considerably more resources for the Norfolk constabulary than under the previous Administration, and I pay tribute to the work it does along with local councils and voluntary organisations.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): May we have a debate on child protection? The Labour Government should be given credit for some wonderful achievements over the past 10 years, and there have also been some encouraging statements over the last two weeks about child protection and joined-up thinking between Government Departments. There will, however, be challenges in the future and we need to debate them soon if we are to improve the lot of children and their safety.

Ms Harman: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to my attention. The subject of the family justice system has already been raised. I will draw the matter to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice. It is important that we do not allow the family justice system to be the poor relation of the criminal justice system. The work it does in ensuring that children can be taken into care can save children's lives, but if it gets things wrong, that can ruin the lives of both parents and children. I take on board his suggestion that we in this House should give greater consideration to that important work.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): The Leader of the House has made an announcement about motions relating to Select Committees, including the Modernisation Committee, which will be debated next Wednesday. In respect of the regional Select Committees, can she advise the House of who will be appointed to those Committees—there are a lot of them—who will staff them, whether the Chairmen of the new Committees will be on the Liaison Committee, and whether they will be paid? A substantial announcement has been made without thought being given to those important questions.

Ms Harman: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the intention is to increase accountability and scrutiny of work done by public authorities in the regions. Further thinking is under way and motions will be tabled on Monday to be debated on Wednesday.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that yesterday the judge who presided over the inquest on the death of Gareth Myatt wrote to the Government with 34 recommendations for action? Will she therefore ensure that we have a debate on early-day motion 1714, which prays for the annulment of statutory instrument No. 1709, which would make it even easier to restrain young people in secure training centres?

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Secure Training Centre (Amendment) Rules 2007 (S.I., 2007, No. 1709), dated 13th June 2007, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13th June, be annulled.]

Ms Harman: The question of restraint of young people in young offenders institutions, which is a very difficult issue, is under discussion in the Ministry of Justice. If there are any further points to be made, they will be brought to the House. I wish to express my condolences to the family of the young man who died, and the important lessons that arise from the coroner's inquest in that case must be learned.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): Does the Leader of the House agree that there is increasing parliamentary and public interest in the policy areas covered by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and will she therefore assure the House that the cut in its time for questions will be restored?

Ms Harman: I remind the hon. Gentleman of what I said to another hon. Member, which was that we will take the opportunity of the recess to review the arrangements for questions. He is right that DEFRA is an important Department and we will ensure that proper time is available to ensure its accountability to this House.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has launched a national debate on the future of our democracy, which will involve people and institutions throughout the land. As usual, one institution is a little off the pace and oblivious to those opportunities. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that proper pre-legislative scrutiny of the Green Paper "The Governance of Britain" takes place across the relevant Committees of this House before the summer, so that the public can start to get involved in the process of remaking our democracy?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have issued the draft legislative programme for consultation. We want to have more Bills notified in advance and more of their provisions published in draft form, and we need to have more discussion before we debate them in this House. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, that is just the start of the process of ensuring more accountability of the Government to the House, and greater topicality for the debates in the House, so that the public can see that we are debating topical issues. We will be able to make progress in many other areas, and I know that my hon. Friend, who has a longstanding interest in such matters, will play an important part in that debate.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will the Government now withdraw their objection to my Bill on the reclassification of cannabis, which could then reach the statute book quickly? Can the Leader of the House update us on the position of home information packs, following the humiliation of the Government in the House of Lords yesterday?

Ms Harman: The home information packs for larger properties will go ahead as previously announced to the House. As for the hon. Gentleman's Bill, the Government have announced a review. We will consult and consider the evidence, and if any changes to legislation are proposed they will be brought to the House as Government business.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole) (Lab): Can my right hon. and learned Friend find time for a debate on the actions of some insurance companies following the recent flooding? A few days ago I met a family from my constituency who were flooded. They do not live on a flood plain, but the combination of the extreme weather and a burst water main near their property led to a one-off flood. The response of their insurance company has been to say that their premium may be hiked and their excess—currently £50—raised to £7,500. Surely that is a disproportionate response to a one-off event caused by freakish weather and a coincidental burst water main? Can we find time to debate such outrages?

Ms Harman: It is important that the insurance industry operates fairly towards those people who have bought insurance policies. I will bring my hon. Friend's comments to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and I suggest that he write to her with the details of that bad sounding case.

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): The crime figures out today show a sharp rise in violence against the person in the Thames valley and a 110 per cent. rise in common assault in the Reading area. Can the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on crime and the fear of crime, because many of my constituents are increasingly concerned by violent crime?

Ms Harman: There will be a statement in about an hour's time, and the hon. Gentleman will also have an opportunity to raise issues of concern to his constituents on the Adjournment next week. I take this opportunity to remind him that the increase in reported crime is to be welcomed in some aspects. For example, we know that rape has traditionally been under-reported, so that when we see an increase in the reports of rape it might mean not an increase in the incidence of rape, but women's greater confidence in the criminal justice system. We know that we see only the tip of the iceberg in the reporting of domestic violence, so that when those figures increase it is to be welcomed. We need to have a sophisticated and in-depth understanding of the figures and recognise that overall the likelihood of being a victim of crime has fallen under this Government.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for hon. Members on both sides of the House to debate the utter failure of some police forces and local authorities to use the powers that we in Parliament have given them to remove unauthorised Traveller encampments, such as the one in Theale in my constituency? Local people have seen their recreation ground invaded, squatted on and used as a public toilet and rubbish tip, while the police fail to use the section 61 public order powers that we made available to them.

Ms Harman: I will draw the issue to the attention of colleagues. It is important that the police and local authorities use the powers that they have to stop unauthorised Travellers' sites, which can make people's lives such a misery.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): May we have an early debate on the future of general hospitals, especially given Lord Darzi's comments last week that the days of district general hospitals providing services to a high level are over? Such comments cause great concern to those who are campaigning to maintain the integrity of general hospitals, such as the Horton hospital in my constituency. Does the Leader of the House agree with Nye Bevan, who said that the NHS will last only while there are still enough folk willing to fight for it?

Ms Harman: The NHS will last while we have a Labour Government determined to increase investment in it. I was not aware that the hon. Gentleman's constituency was in London, because Lord Darzi's quotes relate to the review in London. As a London Member of Parliament, I know that my constituents want the very best specialist services, as well as good local services as near as possible

to where they live. As change in medical practice proceeds, we have to ensure that the way in which services are delivered also changes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. There are 12 hon. Members left who wish to contribute. Many of them are the usual ones—I shall not say that they are the usual suspects. I can seek to take them all, but they must ask only one brief supplementary question.

Anne Mof[redacted]t Lothian) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned friend find time for a debate on corporate responsibility? Last Monday, *The Guardian* carried a very damaging report exposing well known companies and retailers in this country and accusing them of driving down costs at the expense of working conditions, for profit. Is it not time to regulate or legislate to ensure that UK-based companies are held to account?

Ms Harman: That is exactly how the Companies Act 2006 should work. We need to hold companies to account for their corporate social responsibility in this country, and we also need to monitor how British companies act overseas. I will bring the matter to the attention of my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and for International Development.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): The response of the Leader of the House to concerns about the reduction in time for DEFRA questions seemed to improve as she considered the matter. Will she therefore consider extending the time available for those questions, given the interest in climate change, single farm payments, flooding and other issues?

Ms Harman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the first answer that I gave.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Britain's birth rate is falling, but our divorce rate is rising. May we have a debate on whether the way forward is to offer parents struggling with their work-life balance a card like a loyalty bonus card, worth £20 a week, so that they remain in their marriages?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is right that our birth rate is falling and that many families find it difficult to combine bringing up children and holding down jobs. We had a statement last week that included families. The Government know that families come in all shapes and sizes and need practical support, whereas the Tories simply sit in moral judgment on them. That is nothing more than "back to basics", but with an open-necked shirt.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): Unfortunately, but inevitably, the British people have lost trust in the state broadcaster, so does the Leader of the House accept that next Monday's Question Time is quite inadequate for the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to deal with the matter? We have had two statements a day for the past week, most of them pretty irrelevant, so may we have one next week on a matter that directly concerns the British public?

Ms Harman: The BBC Trust has moved quickly to address matters that are of significant public concern. We set it up to represent the interests of licence-fee payers and to ensure that the BBC provides high-quality output. It is a longstanding principle that the Government do not interfere in editorial decisions. We know that the BBC is taking action on the matter, and we support that. We will be looking to see what action is taken, but meanwhile we strongly support the BBC.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate on the gadarene flight to large-scale outsourcing of Government Departments' executive agencies? The most recent example involves the Department for Transport's Vehicle and Operator Service Agency, and the result will be that private profit and road safety are mixed in the most unsatisfactory way, as has happened in mainland Europe and Ireland. What is the rationale for the move, as there is precious little evidence base for improved value for money or for better delivery of Government objectives?

Ms Harman: I will bring the matter to the attention of my ministerial colleagues, and I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on winning the Hansard Society award for Back Bencher of the year.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the ruling that the House of Lords cannot insist on amendments to any Bill that has spending implications? As that would mean that the Lords could not intervene effectively on any Bill, would not it be more honest to abolish it?

Ms Harman: There will be a statement on reform of the House of Lords as soon as we finish this business statement.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): Aircraft carrier statement—when?

Ms Harman: I think that there will be one in due course.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Under Prime Minister Blair, people could sleep safely at night because they knew that the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) would automatically become acting Prime Minister if he were incapacitated. Under the new Prime Minister, it is not clear who would take over. Will the Leader of the House say who would become acting Prime Minister if the new Prime Minister were incapacitated?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman can sleep easily in his bed, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is not incapacitated.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): May we have a full day's debate on the proposed appointment of Parliamentary Private Secretaries to Select Committees? In all sincerity, I advise the right hon. and learned Lady that it is a bit much for a Government who have spent so much time criticising their predecessor to claim now that they are imitating them and that, in any case, two wrongs do not make a right. We must separate the Executive from the legislature, and it would be outrageous

[John Bercow]

to deprive genuine Labour Back Benchers of the chance to sit on Select Committees and use their time and talents to scrutinise the Government's work.

Ms Harman: I did no more than point out that the outrage expressed by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) was feigned, given that the practice was outlawed by the previous Government. I assured the House that this Government would ensure that Parliamentary Private Secretaries would not sit on Committees covering the Departments to which they are responsible. However, I remind the hon. Gentleman that they are not members of the Government.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Given the serious allegations of fraud and deception in some parts of the BBC that were described earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. Mackay) and others, does the Leader of the House agree that it is right that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport should make a statement to the House? It is not good enough for her to say that the BBC Trust will look into the matter. The British public expect better: they pay for the organisation, and they need answers quickly.

Ms Harman: I will draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend. If he feels that he needs to make a statement, no doubt he will bring one to the House.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): May I point out that there is little parliamentary time between now and the intergovernmental conference in October that will agree the text of the new EU reform treaty? So far, the Government have been singularly unable to explain what is substantially different between the new treaty and the old constitution, for which they granted a referendum. Will she therefore guarantee that there will be a full day's debate on the subject before Ministers depart for the conference?

Ms Harman: There usually is a statement around the time of intergovernmental conferences. However, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the treaty makes it clear that the constitutional concept has been abandoned.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Following on from that excellent question from my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), may we have an urgent statement on the adequacy of the French and German translation service supplied to No. 10 Downing street? Giscard d'Estaing has said that the changes to the amending treaty are "more cosmetic than real" and that the "treaty remains largely unaltered", while Chancellor Merkel has said that the

"substance of the constitution is preserved".

Clearly, the Prime Minister cannot have been furnished with those transcripts, as it would be inconceivable that he would go back on his promise to hold a referendum on changing the constitution of Europe.

Ms Harman: There is no going back on any such promise. Obviously, repeating existing treaties and drawing them all together means that a lot of the substance remains unchanged.

House of Lords Reform

12.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the way forward on reform of the House of Lords.

On 7 March 2007, after the free votes in both Houses, I said that I would make arrangements to reconvene the cross-party working group and that, after discussions with that group, I would return to the House to make a statement outlining the Government's plans. Those free votes marked the fulfilment of the specific terms of one of our manifesto commitments on Lords reform. While the votes were an important milestone, we must not now lose the opportunity to make further and more fundamental reform happen.

In March, this House voted overwhelmingly—indeed, by a majority of 113—for a wholly elected House of Lords. It backed by a margin of 38 a substantially elected House based on an 80 per cent. elected and a 20 per cent. appointed element. It also voted by a majority of 280 to remove the remaining hereditary peers. As part of a comprehensive package of reforms, the Government are committed to removing the anomaly of the remaining hereditary peers, in line with the will of this House.

As this House will be aware, at the same time the other place voted for a wholly appointed House by a majority of 240. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in his statement of 3 July that we should proceed in line with the wishes of this House, which all accept is the primary Chamber. That approach was underlined in the Green Paper on constitutional reform, "The Governance of Britain", which I published on the same day. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties are committed by their 2005 manifestos to a substantially elected House of Lords. *[Interruption.]* There was no commitment in the Conservative or Liberal Democrat manifestos to a free vote.

Tomorrow in the other place Lord Steel's private Member's Bill on Lords reform will have its Second Reading. My noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath will expand on our response when he speaks in that debate; suffice it now to say that the Bill does not contain the comprehensive reform that is the clear will of this House.

The cross-party talks before the free votes were successful in building up a significant degree of consensus on a range of issues, as reflected in the White Paper on House of Lords reform, which I published in February. I believe that this is the best way of proceeding. I shall continue to lead the cross-party talks, and since the free votes, we have held two further meetings. Given that all three main parties are committed by their manifestos to further reform of the House of Lords, it is right that the group should consist of Front-Bench representatives of the parties, as well as representatives from the Cross Benchers and the Lords Spiritual, but of course we want the widest possible consensus, and I intend to make arrangements so that we can take proper account of the views of all parliamentarians, including non-party independent Members, and interest groups and the public.

The White Paper adumbrated the view that the consensus was for a hybrid House involving a 50 per cent. elected and a 50 per cent. appointed element. However, since both Houses rejected that option—notwithstanding my advocacy of it, or perhaps because of my advocacy of it—we will have to proceed with remodelling our work based on an 80 per cent. or 100 per cent. elected House of Lords.

Although there is agreement on some of the areas outlined in the White Paper, there is still some way to go on some other issues. The group will discuss the outstanding elements of the reform package, including powers, electoral systems, financial packages, and the balance and size of the House, including diversity and gender issues. We will also need to discuss the transition towards a reformed House in detail, including the position of the existing life peers and the need for action to avoid gratuitously cutting Conservative party representation in the Lords when and if the remaining hereditary peers are removed.

Let me turn to the powers of a reformed House. The Government have always said that the balance of powers between the two Houses described by the excellent and recent Cunningham report should apply to a reformed House. Those powers are currently underpinned by some statutory provisions, standing orders and conventions. We undertook to look further at whether the current conventions were adequate to ensure the desired relationship with a reformed House, following the free votes.

Over the coming months, we will look at how best to deliver a substantially or wholly elected second Chamber, based on the principle that this House is the primary Chamber and that an elected House of Lords should complement the House of Commons and not be a rival to it. As part of that programme of work it is vital that the relative powers of a reformed House be made clear. We will therefore look at ways to enshrine in a constitutional settlement the current balance of powers and the different roles of the two Houses.

The Government are determined to proceed with this programme of reform with a view to its completion. In dealing with such a central element of the constitution, it is right that there be as much all-party agreement as possible. I accept that there may well not be total agreement, but the constitution does not belong to any one party and it should not be used as a partisan tool.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): It does not belong to you, either.

Mr. Straw: The immediate next steps are that I hope to be able to publish a further White Paper around the turn of the year setting out where we have got to in the cross-party talks—possibly accompanied by draft clauses that would form elements of the final reform Bill. Our intention through the work of the cross-party group is to formulate a comprehensive reform package that we would put to the electorate as a manifesto commitment at the next general election and which hopefully the other main parties would include in their manifestos. *[Interruption.]* There may of course be areas on which each party takes a different view—and we have heard some of them already. However, there is the potential to reach a degree of cross-party consensus that will lead to the completion of Lords reform. The free votes in the Commons in March gave us a clear

[Mr. Straw]

direction of travel on an issue that has dogged the country for decades. We now have a chance finally to finish the job.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Lord Chancellor for his statement and for his courtesy in letting me have sight of it in advance. At the outset, may I pay tribute to his considerable efforts to move forwards on the issue of Lords reform and the way in which he is attempting to do so by consensus? It has not always been an easy journey for him and he has gracefully departed from his own preferred option of a hybrid half-elected, half-appointed Lords—or rather, that option departed from him. It is dead. In fact, it was never alive. In March, this House voted for a substantially elected second Chamber. I welcome the Lord High Chancellor to the ranks of those of us—the majority—who voted for the democratic option.

Following the votes in March, does the Lord Chancellor remember saying on the "Today" programme:

"There's now a momentum behind change...Members of Parliament want a wholly or predominantly elected House of Lords. It's now our duty to deliver that"?

But how much momentum is there? Today he said that the Government are determined to complete Lords reform—but when? It seems that his new ambition is to secure a manifesto commitment for reform at the next election, but that election may not be held for another two or three years and the Labour party first had a manifesto commitment on the issue in 1992. Is not the real message in his statement that Lords reform is on ice until after the next election?

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Quite right.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Quite right.

Nick Herbert: There will be another White Paper and possibly draft clauses, but can the Lord Chancellor confirm that he has no plans to introduce legislation to deliver a substantially elected upper House in this Parliament?

Sir Nicholas Winterton: We hope so.

Sir Patrick Cormack: We hope so.

Nick Herbert: It is now eight years since Parliament embarked on stage 1 of reform. Does the Lord Chancellor—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. It would be very helpful if hon. Members waited for the initial statement and response to be completed before making their contributions.

Nick Herbert: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is now eight years since Parliament embarked on stage 1 of reform. Does the Lord Chancellor recall that when the Government agreed that 92 hereditary peers would remain in the House of Lords pending further reform, his predecessor, Lord Irvine of Lairg, told the Lords that the retention of those peers reflected

"a compromise negotiated between Privy Councillors on Privy Council terms and binding in honour on all those who have come to give it their assent"?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 March 1999; Vol. 599, c. 207.]

As one of those Privy Councillors, will the Lord Chancellor confirm that he remains bound in honour, that the promise made then holds good, and that, although he repeats the Government's commitment to remove the remaining hereditary peers, that will not happen unless and until stage 2 of the reforms is complete?

In 1924, Winston Churchill said:

"if we are to leave the venerable if somewhat crumbled rock on which the House of Lords now stands, there is no safe foothold until we come to an elected chamber."

Will the Lord Chancellor clarify the Government's stance on the Bill introduced by Lord Steel, which will be debated in the other place tomorrow? The Bill would gradually remove hereditary peers, eventually leaving an all-appointed Lords. The Lord Chancellor merely said that "the Bill does not contain the comprehensive reform that is the clear will of this House," but given that the Bill breaches Lord Irvine's undertaking and is clearly incompatible with a predominantly elected Lords, surely the Government should oppose it. If they do not, what conclusion can we draw about their seriousness in taking reform forward?

The whole House will agree with the Lord Chancellor that the Commons must be the primary Chamber and that an elected Lords should complement the Commons and not be a rival to it, but after the Cunningham report on parliamentary conventions, the powers of the upper House are more closely defined than ever before. This House has the purse strings and the Parliament Acts, while the upper House has the power to delay. When the Lord Chancellor says that he wishes to look again at the adequacy of the conventions governing the relationship between the two Houses, does he accept that maintaining the primacy of this House should not mean weakening the Lords? It should mean strengthening Parliament as a whole so that the Executive can be held properly to account.

I welcome the Lord Chancellor's comment that the constitution does not belong to any one party and that it should not be used as a party tool. It is important that we move forward on the basis of consensus—*[Interruption.]* Does he understand the profound concern among Conservative Members about the existing White Paper's proposals for electoral systems and constituencies? An electoral system that is based on closed lists and large, artificial, multi-member constituencies would keep power in the hands of party bosses. We cannot accept the removal of the independence and authority of the present Lords unless real democratic accountability is put in its place. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that we should aim for a strong revising second Chamber with democratic legitimacy, not a House of party placemen? *[Interruption.]*

We want to build a second Chamber with legitimacy, authority and the ability to play a full part in holding the Executive to account. We will work constructively with the Government in their search for consensus to that end. However, the preamble to the Parliament Act 1911 said:

"it is intended to substitute for the House of Lords as it at present exists a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis, but such substitution cannot be immediately brought into operation".

Does not the Lord Chancellor's statement indicate that far from being able "finally to finish the job", as he said, we remain, nearly a century later, in precisely the same position: intending reform, but still waiting?

Mr. Straw: That was all very interesting. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on trying to have it both ways. One understands why he did so, given the extent of the division on the issue in his party. He did very well to get through his contribution, notwithstanding the noises directly behind him that punctuated his speech. I was reminded of the late Iain Macleod's commentary that when one is speaking from the Front Bench, while one might have the opposition in front of one, one always has the enemy behind—*[Interruption.]* On this occasion, I look behind me and see nothing but friends. One or two still need re-education, but that is another matter.

I am glad that the Conservative party has been engaged in a process of Pauline conversion. Let me remind the hon. Gentleman of why the preamble to the 1911 Parliament Act said that the process would take a long time. That was due to the opposition not of the Liberal or Labour parties, but of the Conservative party. It was wonderful that in 2005—at long last—the Conservative party included a commitment on the matter in its manifesto. The Liberals and the Labour party have been promising such change since 1910, although we have had some difficulty delivering it.

There will unquestionably be opposition from the other place, but I want us to get this through without a train wreck. We will do that if each party gives a clear manifesto commitment to going for a wholly or substantially elected second Chamber with the balance of power between the two Chambers as it is described now, although not necessarily in the conventions. I believe that that will be my party's position and although this is a matter for the Liberal party, I am pretty certain that it will be its position. The question is whether that will be the Conservatives' position. Is it true, as I am told, that the Leader of the Opposition went to a meeting of Conservative Back Benchers earlier this year—he might not have done this, but it has never been denied when I have put it privately to Conservative Members—and said, to calm a rebellion, that as far as the Conservatives were concerned, if they were elected to government, Lords reform would be a "third-term issue"?

Sir Patrick Cormack *indicated assent.*

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman confirms that that was said. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), as a radical in the shadow Cabinet, needs to ensure that he moves the rather backward-leaning Leader of the Opposition towards his position.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether we would stick to what Lord Irvine of Lairg said in his statement on the compromise that led to the eccentric provision under which 92 hereditary peers were elected by their hereditary peers, with the process perpetuating itself through elections involving those peers. In the end, that is a matter for the House. Let me remind him that Division No. 71 in this Session took place on an amendment proposed by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) to a motion that I moved. My motion stated:

"That this House is of the opinion that the remaining retained places for peers whose membership is based on the hereditary principle should be removed",

and the amendment would have added the words

"once elected members have taken their places in a reformed House of Lords."

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs was one of the 241 Members who voted for the amendment—I happened to vote against it.

After the amendment had been knocked out, there was a Division on the main Question:

"That this House is of the opinion that the remaining retained places for peers whose membership is based on the hereditary principle should be removed"—

full stop, without any qualification. The whole issue was whether the House supported Lord Irvine of Lairg's position. Guess what, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The hon. Gentleman may have forgotten what happened, but surprisingly, I cannot find his name anywhere in the list of Members who voted No. However, one of the 391 Members who voted in the Aye Lobby was "Herbert, Nick". It might be that someone else of that name managed to secrete themselves in the Lobby, but I think that it was the hon. Gentleman. He supported the decision that was agreed by a majority of 280, that the hereditary peers should be removed.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the adequacy of the conventions and the maintenance of the primacy of this House. I do not think that there is a huge division among the parties on that. My speeches on 6 March and 7 March made it clear that I accept the principle that the question of powers is not a zero-sum game. There is not a quantum of power in the building that can exist only at one end or the other. Throughout my period in the House, I have been committed to making Parliament more effective. I accept that that involves making it more effective at both ends of the building, but the hon. Gentleman must accept that the workings of the Government and Parliament would become impossible if one House did not have primacy. Perhaps he wants to go down the route of bicameral parliaments that just achieve deadlock, but he should consider the fact that some European countries cannot be governed because there is no clarity about which chamber has power.

We do not disagree with the description set out in Cunningham 2 of the balance of powers of the two Chambers. I hope that the totality of power of both Chambers together will grow. However, we take issue with whether the conventions are adequate, and Lord Wakeham supports us in that respect.

My last point—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Well, I always try to give full answers, especially when I am involved in a pedagogical process. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Parliament Act 1911. This has taken a long time, but I hope that he recognises that we have made considerable progress. If the Conservative party makes a commitment in its manifesto, we certainly can, in the first couple of years of the next Parliament, complete this job.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I say to the House that this is a statement, not a debate? If possible, may we have brief questions and, if the Secretary of State would not mind, brief answers?

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will not mind if I say that the implication of his statement is that comprehensive reform of the House of Lords is not an immediate prospect. I hope that he will not set his face against a more limited reform measure that would put the House of Lords Appointments Commission on a statutory basis, separate the honours system from service in the second Chamber, and give the House of Lords the ability to remove people who bring dishonour on it.

Mr. Straw: I have two quick answers. First, to get to where we want to go, we have to make clear progress, but in the absence of categorical manifesto commitments from the three parties, we would simply find ourselves bogged down in endless debate on the Floor of the House before the next election. I want to make clear progress, so that in the first Session of the next Parliament, we can introduce a final measure. Secondly, on a limited reform measure—that takes us back to Lord Steel's proposal—let us see what the House of Lords says about it. One thing has to be clear: such a reform cannot be an alternative to the major reform to which the House is now committed.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): The Lord Chancellor knows that we welcome his statement, his continuing interest and commitment to the subject, and his willingness to change his position to accommodate the views of the majority in all parties. He knows that the Liberal Democrats have said yes to cross-party talks, to seeking maximum agreement between the parties, to making sure that the Commons is the primary Chamber, and to making sure that we get on with the process.

If the right hon. Gentleman is really committed—and if the new Prime Minister is really committed, as last week's announcement suggested—to a major new constitutional settlement, in which there is a properly democratic bicameral Parliament, and in which the Executive return more powers to Parliament, would it not be logical to get on with the process, rather than slow it down? That way, the Government can be seen to deliver on a final transformation of the House of Lords into a proper democratic Chamber within 100 years of the original commitment. Otherwise, we will delay the decision for another Parliament, and goodness knows what the result will be, what the balance of Parliament will be, and who will be sitting in his position and taking an interest in the subject.

Will the right hon. Gentleman reflect again on the fact that if there is no White Paper until the turn of the year, realistically, it will mean legislation in 2008 or 2009 at the earliest? We read reports that there might be a general election before then, and that would obviously put the process in jeopardy. Does he agree absolutely that it would not be acceptable to replace the House of Lords, whether appointed or hereditary, with a second Chamber in which the parties, rather than the people, choose who represents them?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the Liberal Democrats' categorical and full-hearted support; we have not heard from them any of the cavilling that we sometimes hear from Conservative Front Benchers. The issue is really one of haste and speed. If we are too hasty, the matter will fall, and I want it to reach fulfilment. I am clear that we can get there, but there are many big issues that we have yet to determine. If that is not done, we will simply end up having hours and hours of debate on the Floor of the House without reaching conclusions, including on the electoral systems. I should just say to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs—I am sorry that I did not answer this question earlier—that I am, of course, ready to look again at the whole issue of electoral systems.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): We have a convicted fraudster, Conrad Black, and a tax exile, Lord Laidlaw, in the House of Lords. Surely we should take early action to rid the House of Lords of people like that, rather than wait until a comprehensive Bill is introduced after the next election.

Mr. Straw: I agree with that, but the difficulty in introducing a limited measure is that reform that is not properly thought through can be added to it. If there are other ways of achieving my hon. Friend's aim, so much the better.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): Does the Lord Chancellor agree that constitutional reform has not been one of his Government's greatest triumphs? Will he concede, and take some comfort from the fact, that of those Conservative MPs who voted when votes were last held on the issue, a majority voted for one of the elected options, and a majority voted against a wholly appointed House? Will he give an undertaking that by the end of this Parliament, a draft Bill will be ready, which can be introduced in the next Parliament?

Mr. Straw: We have made rather more progress on reform of the Lords than any previous Administration, including those of which the right hon. Gentleman was an adornment. On the issue of a draft Bill, we are certainly aiming to produce draft clauses. Whether we can get to a full draft Bill depends on the extent to which we can agree an overall settlement in the cross-party talks, but I hope that we can reach such a settlement.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is hardly in a position to criticise the Leader of the Opposition for making House of Lords reform a third-term issue, given that, under our Government, it has become a fourth-term issue. Does he agree that the Bill that will come before the House of Lords tomorrow largely satisfies the commitments made in the Labour party's manifesto for the last election, and will he confirm that the Government will support the Bill? Will he also confirm that although the House voted for a wholly elected second Chamber, it was not clear what form the elections would take, who would qualify to stand for election, or who the electorate would be?

Mr. Straw: I cannot confirm my hon. Friend's statement. We said that there would be free votes on the issues, and there have been free votes; the House has spoken. I know that he disagrees with its decision, but the majorities in favour of 100 per cent. and 80 per cent. elected were overwhelming.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Would the Lord High Chancellor, as we must get used to calling him, accept that that majority in favour of 100 per cent. elected was largely engineered by the tactical voting of the hon. Member for Tyne Bridge (Mr. Clelland), who took his troops into the Aye Lobby although they were really not in favour of the proposal? Does the right hon. Gentleman also accept that in every Division, more Conservative Members voted against 80 per cent. elected and 20 per cent. appointed than for? Similarly, more voted against 100 per cent. elected than for. Does he accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who is newly appointed to the Front Bench, does not speak for the majority of the parliamentary Conservative party, and that the Lord Chancellor will have a real fight on his hands if he tries to destroy the current constitution, as he is seeking to do?

Mr. Straw: I am not seeking to destroy the constitution—of course not. I am seeking to make considerable progress on the issue on a consensual basis, and I am trying to nail down some very difficult details before we bring forward a Bill, because that is the only way that we will get a satisfactory and pretty permanent settlement. As for the votes, I always work on the basis that when hon. Members choose which Division Lobby to go through, they know the consequences, and those who voted in favour of 80 or 100 per cent. elected knew what the consequences would be.

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): No one should have a job for life without accountability, and it is right that we should have a wholly or substantially elected House of Lords, but does my right hon. Friend agree that success will depend on what form the elections take? I do not want party managers dominating the election process, or closed lists. I would like organisations to have the chance, perhaps indirectly, to elect Members of the House of Lords, because it is important that we retain the expertise and experience in the House of Lords, as well as its independence.

Mr. Straw: First, I look forward to discussing my hon. Friend's proposals in detail. Secondly, I am against closed lists for the elections. There is a debate to be held about the election systems used. Let me make it clear that I am not in favour of closed lists of the kind used in European elections for elections to the House of Lords.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I would be grateful if the Secretary of State stopped using the phrase "primacy of the House of Commons". What he actually means is the primacy of the Executive. So long as the Government can retain control over their party, they can do as they please. We need Back-Bench Members of this House to reassert their independence, to recover the powers that the Executive have stolen from us, and to free ourselves from the tyranny of the Whips. That is what we need to do.

Mr. Straw: I do not remember the right hon. and learned Gentleman saying that when he was a Minister.

Sir George Young: He was a Whip!

Mr. Straw: I know—and a bad Whip, too. I say to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) that when we have a strong Executive, as we do, our constitution can work only if there is a strong House of Commons and a strong Parliament. I support that, but if there is to be a Government, one House has to have primacy. The decision to accept the primacy of the House of Commons was not made by the Government. It was made by the House of Commons in a free vote when we set up the terms of reference of the Cunningham 2 Committee on 10 May last year.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): I enjoyed the first part of the statement about trying to build consensus across the House, but having listened to the contributions of Opposition Members, I am not sure that we will achieve that in time for the 2009 manifesto. Although my right hon. Friend has so far resisted the call to bring forward some of the measures, will he consider bringing some of them forward—for example, the role of the bishops in the House of Lords? They could be removed, along with hereditary peers, as quickly as possible, as part of our disestablishment of the Church of England.

Mr. Straw: Oh goody. Then we would really have a consensus. It is preferable that we proceed as I suggest, otherwise we will end up with deadlock, which is where we have ended up before.

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): With a wholly elected second Chamber, how is the significant and valuable proportion of independent Members to be maintained?

Mr. Straw: By definition, that cannot be maintained as it is at present. That is why I voted for 80 per cent., as well as the perfectly formed but unsupportable 50 per cent.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): I strongly welcome the statement from the Secretary of State for Justice. Will he stick immovably to the democratic principle that those who exercise political power in a democracy must be elected? Those who vote must be elected. That, of course, allows some elbow room for my right hon. Friend to ensure that those who do not vote in a second Chamber—those who therefore do not exercise political power—may find a place, whether they are existing or future Members of such a House.

Mr. Straw: The primary Chamber must be wholly elected. We will continue to have a debate about whether the second Chamber should be wholly or substantially elected.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): Will the Secretary of State resist the siren calls for piecemeal reform, even though the individual ideas might be quite good? That threatens the programme itself. The important thing at this stage is to get on with the comprehensive reform as quickly as possible. In that regard, I add my voice to those who are disappointed that what he has announced today means that there is no possibility of an early election to the House of Lords. Does he envisage the possibility of an election to the House of Lords within the term of the next Parliament, not having to wait till the following general election?

Mr. Straw: The more progress we can make on the all-party talks beforehand, and the more we can deal with the devil in the detail, the more likely it is that we could get the reform through in the first Session of a new Parliament, without running into overwhelming objections by the other place, which acknowledges the primacy of this Chamber. If that were the case, elections to the other Chamber could certainly take place during that Parliament.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): I welcome the parts of the Lord Chancellor's statement that move us further down the democratic path, as many hon. Members have sought during their time in this place. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that he has comprehensively buried the doomed and somewhat arrogant contention that our democracy will be better served by a unicameral system, with no revising Chamber at all?

Mr. Straw: I have never supported that and the House buried it by an overwhelming vote. It was the very first vote, No. 65, on 7 March.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): Given the recent decision of the Government to confirm the Church of England as the established Church, will the right hon. Gentleman assure me that there will always be enough bishops in the Church of England to work the system properly?

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Including women.

Robert Key: Of course that includes women bishops. Will the right hon. Gentleman also take the opportunity to examine the legislative relationship between the Church of England and Parliament, which is archaic and is effectively governed through the Ecclesiastical Committee with a precursor pre-legislative stage of legislation? Will he revise that system to bring it more into line with 21st century practice?

Mr. Straw: I declare an interest, as I am also a communicating member of the Church of England and believe in the established Church, but that view is not wholly shared in all parts of the House, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. On the second point, I personally want to see a significant representation of the Lords Spiritual in the second Chamber. We must be very careful before we discuss Church of England reform in the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman may recall—not from his own memory, but from the history books—that the 1874 Session of Parliament was dominated from one end to the other by discussions of Church of England reform. I do not want to go down as the Lord Chancellor with that legacy.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): Both Houses have clearly expressed a view about what we should do about Lords reform, but the electorate has not yet expressed a view specifically. I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the fact that in those votes 155 Labour Members voted for a unicameral Parliament. That may represent a much larger proportion of voters outside the Chamber, and they should be given the choice in a referendum as to whether they want a second Chamber in the future. I remind my right hon. Friend that a number of Parliaments have abolished their second Chamber, and many successful democracies have single Houses.

Mr. Straw: As we set out in the White Paper, there are very few countries of our size that have unicameral Chambers. I strongly believe that a unicameral Chamber would lead to more power going to the Executive and less power to elected people in this Chamber, as well as the other place.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will the Secretary of State explain a little more clearly how, in a unitary rather than a federal state, there can be two competing sources of electoral authority?

Mr. Straw: Of course there can be. There are plenty of unitary states that have two Chambers, but if the hon. Gentleman takes a different view about an elected second Chamber, that is his opinion, but it is currently not shared by a majority of the House.

Chris Bryant: As one who supports a democratic second Chamber, I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has retained responsibility for the subject, not least because I remember the days when he was in favour of a 0 per cent. elected element in the second Chamber. He was then in favour of 50 per cent. and now 80 per cent., so we have got him from 0 to 80 per cent. in just five years. There is an important principle by which the House of Lords has always abided until now. If there is a clear manifesto commitment by a governing party that it will implement, the Lords will not stand in the way. Is that not why it is extremely important that Labour's manifesto, as the party that will win the next general election, is unambiguous on the matter?

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for complimenting my ability to listen to arguments. I have shifted on the matter; I am perfectly willing to say that. On the second point, I agree that we need a clear manifesto commitment, then we can get the measure through.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I remind the Lord Chancellor that there are more than three political parties in the House. He gave an assurance to my right hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) that we would play a meaningful part in the cross-party discussions. I remind the hon. Gentleman also that it was the Scottish national party and Plaid Cymru that destroyed the credible case for appointment by pursuing cash for honours in the way that we did. Can he assure me that the cross-party talks will indeed be cross-party?

Mr. Straw: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. We are suggesting that the key cross-party group should be the three parties, but I promise him that there will be—we should have made previous arrangements—discussions with his party, Plaid Cymru and other smaller parties in the House. I am sorry about that. As for the other point, the debate about whether there should be an elected element is nothing whatever to do with that which he mentions.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I am fully signed up to these LPs and senators—a very good idea. Will the—what is my right hon. Friend called now?

Mr. Straw: Secretary of State.

Andrew Mackinlay: Will the Secretary of State reconsider the idea of Ministers in either House being able to appear in either House, especially once there are elections down at the other end of the Corridor? It is ridiculous that Lords in Waiting—I do not say this in any disparaging way—are parrots who just read from a brief. It would be much better if the Minister who was the architect of a piece of legislation piloted it through both Houses. There are plenty of precedents for that in Westminster-style constitutions. I hope that that will be looked at.

Mr. Straw: We will certainly look at that, although I am not certain that I will end up in the same place as my hon. Friend.

Andrew Mackinlay: I am going to heaven.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I agree with the question from the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay). Does the Secretary of State accept that many of us in the House believe that people want to destroy the current House of Lords because it is too successful? It represents the best interests of the people of this country and although it is not democratic, it was never set up to be democratic. It is there because of its experience and expertise, and we should appreciate the role that it has played.

Mr. Straw: It was set up precisely not to be democratic and resisted all democratic change throughout the process of change, particularly in the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. I applaud the role of the House of Lords, which has actually been strengthened as a result of the changes that we introduced in the first Parliament of this Administration. As I said to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), I have never believed that there is a quantum of power that is fixed within this Palace. We have a strong Executive in this country—I believe that that produces benefits—but a strong Executive requires there to be a strong Parliament. That does not mean, however, that we freeze forever the particular constitution of the other place.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Lord High Chancellor made great play of giving more power to the people, as did the White Paper on governance. I speak as one who is in favour of an elected House of Lords. Does he agree that it is essential to ensure that there is no proportional representation in the voting system—not merely not a closed list but none at all—and that, to enhance the reputation of the House of Lords, serious consideration should be given to it conducting its business without whipping? I follow what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said about this. It is very important that it should have that degree of independence.

Mr. Straw: That would ultimately be a matter for the other place. If the hon. Gentleman aspires to have a Government whom he can support, which may be an impossibility in his case, he will recognise the case for whipping at both ends of the Corridor. As for proportional representation, there will be a debate about that. Although I am passionately in favour of single member constituencies for this place, I recognise that there is a case for multi-member constituencies for the other place. We have to work through this.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I always thought that the right hon. Gentleman was a tough cookie. May I tell him, for the avoidance of doubt, that he should not be intimidated or slowed down in any way by the reactionary, antediluvian, troglodyte forces in all parties who oppose reform, that the arguments for democracy remain strong, and that he should proceed with a Bill sooner rather later?

Mr. Straw: I am glad of the hon. Gentleman's support.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Lord High Chancellor has a great opportunity to strengthen Parliament and weaken the power of the Executive. Will he assure the House that the constitutional settlement to which he refers will be agreed before there are any changes to the system for election or appointment to the House of Lords?

Mr. Straw: The one is part of the other. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but that is simply the case. We are seeking to produce a comprehensive package of reforms that will lead to a new composition of the second Chamber.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that if Lord Malloch-Brown and Lord West of Spithead had had to stand for election, neither would have been able to achieve the experience at the United Nations or as Chief of Defence Intelligence which precisely fits them so well to be part of a revising Chamber and, indeed, Ministers in his Government? Is it not the case that if the 100 per cent. proposal—the one with the support of this House—goes through, there will be no prospect of such people getting into the other House, and that if the 80 per cent. proposal goes through, the people with the experience will not have the democratic mandate and the people with the democratic mandate will not have the experience?

Mr. Straw: That is pretty insulting as regards the kind of people who will be attracted to a second Chamber. I know that the hon. Gentleman is one of the troglodytes on the Conservative Benches. I acknowledge that there is a case for an appointed element. That is why I supported a 50 per cent. appointed element and then, when that failed catastrophically, went for an 80 per cent. elected element with a 20 per cent. appointed element. There will be much to be said on this on all sides until we finally reach agreement.

Crime Reduction

1.24 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jacqui Smith): With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's new crime strategy. The strategy sets out the overarching principles, the context and the framework for tackling crime over the next three years.

Over the past 10 years, we have revolutionised the crime fighting landscape. We have provided record levels of funding, created new powers and partnerships, and set targets. With those working on the front line, we now have a better understanding of who commits crime, under what circumstances, and how and when to stop it. This formidable combination has seen crime fall by around a third since 1997. Car crime has halved, meaning over 1.8 million fewer incidents. On average, the chances of becoming a victim of burglary are roughly now once every 40 years, compared with every 25 years a decade ago. Staffing levels across the police service are at a record high, at more than 223,000 people, and the chances of becoming a victim of crime remain at historically low levels. Those are real achievements that make a difference to people's everyday lives. I would like to pay tribute to the thousands of dedicated people on the front line, who, through their ambition and dedication, are working day in, day out to make our neighbourhoods safer, and to thank them all for the real difference they have made in communities across the country.

As today's crime statistics show, we are holding to the improvements in the falls in crime, but we must go further. Now is the time to reinvigorate our efforts to ensure that we continue to make strong and sustainable reductions in crime. That is what the public expect; and as the nature of crime evolves, so must our approach. We all have a part to play in tackling crime, and now is the time for us to update and strengthen the terms of our partnership. We will refocus the work of central Government, concentrating on where we can make the most impact, particularly on areas where policy and delivery are newer and need national energy. I will lead a drive to join up Whitehall, bringing Departments together under a new national crime reduction board to lead, support and, where necessary, to challenge local delivery. At neighbourhood level, by April 2008 there will be a neighbourhood policing team in every community in England and Wales.

Crime cannot be tackled by police alone. It is now nearly 10 years since we established crime and disorder reduction partnerships to lead delivery of crime reduction at the local level, and much has been achieved by that partnership working. We now need a step change in the way that partnerships operate so that they can effectively respond to the spectrum of crime from the everyday to the extraordinary—from graffiti at the bus stop to terrorism. The reform programme that is under way will ensure that step change. New standards for crime and disorder reduction partnerships will be in place later this year. The new standards for community engagement will mean listening and acting on the concerns of local communities. Standards for performance will mean that partnerships are appropriately supported and challenged as necessary. We will measure how confident the public are in the agencies that collectively deal with crime and disorder problems at local level. Building on the work of Professor Adrian Smith's review of crime statistics, published today, we will ensure that people have better access to local statistics. Working with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities, we will ensure that by July next year, everyone will be able to have access to meaningful local crime information updated every month so that they can see how their priorities are being tackled.

The crime strategy will also focus on how we can intervene earlier to reduce crime and its effects, particularly with young people. Young people are frequently victims of crime. That is why I want to hear directly from them about their fears about crime and disorder and what we should be doing to help them to feel safe in their communities. In the autumn, the Youth Parliament will hold a special session so that I can hear at first hand what young people think would make a real difference here. I want to build on the positive links between schools and police already established through safer schools partnerships and to ensure that working with young people is a core part of neighbourhood policing in every neighbourhood.

In order to turn new technology to our advantage, we will lead a greater drive on designing out crime so that the iPhones and satnavs of the future are worthless to thieves. I am immensely grateful to Sebastian Conran, John Sorrell and the others who are coming forward to build a new design and technology alliance of people with a range of expertise to champion this approach. In our new partnership, we want partners in the voluntary sector to take a leading role in fighting crime, and in designing national and local initiatives.

As hon. Members know, antisocial behaviour remains a key local concern. Today's statistics show that we have kept antisocial behaviour under control. The proportion of people who believe such behaviour to be a big problem in their area is down to 18 per cent. from a peak of 21 per cent. in 2002-03. Over the past 10 years, we have put in place a range of measures to tackle antisocial behaviour—from informal acceptable behaviour contracts to more formal antisocial behaviour orders and crack house closure powers. We want crime and disorder reduction partnerships throughout the country to use the full range of tools and powers they have at their disposal to tackle problems that matter to local people.

Finally, I want to talk about violent crime, such as murder, gun and knife crime, domestic violence and sexual offending, which has the highest and most devastating impact on individuals and communities. We are seeing signs of real progress here and today's statistics are positive—overall violence is down 31 per cent. since 1997—but we know that we must do more. We will ensure that we work more closely with our delivery partners to prevent violence occurring in the first place by addressing the drivers of violence such as drugs and alcohol. When violence does occur, we will be robust in the prosecuting and managing of offenders, and we will support victims to reduce the harm of violence. We must look for innovative solutions to difficult and challenging issues, including knife crime.

Under the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, those who carry knives face a maximum of four years' imprisonment—double the previous maximum. We

have also created powers for school staff to search pupils for weapons. However, we must recognise the work of the voluntary sector, and work with it to maximise our impact, which is why the Home Office is funding the excellent work of the Damilola Taylor Trust. It is aiming to sign up half the 11 to 16-year-olds in the country to its "Respect Your Life Not a Knife" pledge campaign.

We have proved that when you tackle unemployment and drug and alcohol misuse, crime comes down. When schools and health services, local authorities, police and neighbours work together, crime comes down. When you are not afraid to make tough choices about enforcing standards of behaviour, crime comes down. Together, we can continue to drive down crime levels. This new crime strategy sets out what we need to do to refresh our approach and I commend it to the House.

David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for early sight of her statement.

For 10 years, the Government have been trying to claim that crime is coming down. Unfortunately for the Government, the public obstinately insist on believing their own experience rather than ministerial claims and simply know that crime is going up, and all the fiddled figures in the world will not change their minds. The central contention of the Home Secretary's statement today is based on flawed data. The Home Secretary repeats the mantra that crime has fallen, based on the British crime survey, but the BCS ignores the most serious crimes, such as murders. Despite the Home Secretary's comments, for many years, it ignored crimes against children, and it ignores a total of at least 18 million crimes. How can the Home Secretary tackle crime, when she cannot even count it properly?

However, let me start by welcoming some aspects of the Home Secretary's announcements, where she has adopted Conservative policy. We have been calling for years for direct, local accountability of police forces. She announced a small step in that direction. I congratulate her on that small step, and hope that we will see more. We have been calling for years for local crime data to inform that local accountability. Again, she has announced a small step in that direction, and I congratulate her on that. For the past three years, I have been calling for an initiative on designing out crime, so I particularly congratulate her on that.

Some crimes are going down, but the evidence is that this has little to do with the Government, and according to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, it has nothing to do with Government spending. The Government must take responsibility for overall recorded crime going up by 300,000, and more importantly, for the most serious crimes going up sharply. Recorded violent crime has doubled. This morning on television the Home Secretary said that drug crime is down. I just do not know where that idea came from—perhaps from the same advisers who told her predecessors to declassify cannabis. Drug offences have increased by about 50 per cent. during the term of this Government, and by 9 per cent. this year, and that figure is increasing faster every year because of the confused and contradictory signals they have sent out.

The Government should not go in for self-deception. Let us look at the news of the last 48 hours. The Government said that 24-hour drinking would convert binge drinkers to a café-style culture. The doctors say that alcohol-related assaults have doubled in one year. The Government claimed an increase in the number of offenders brought to justice. The Home Affairs Committee says that nearly half of those offenders receive just a slap on the wrist and that they should not be counted.

The Government say that crime is down by a third. The Home Secretary might take time to read some of the documents produced by the people who work for her—in this case, the police. I quote Detective Constable Marsh, who said:

"At conference John Reid congratulated us for reducing crime. I have been in CID virtually all my service and crime has not reduced. It is out of control."

Should people believe the Government, or doctors, the Home Affairs Committee and the police? If the Home Secretary thinks that the Government's strategy has been such a success, can she answer some questions for me? First, why has violent crime doubled, knife crime doubled and gun crime doubled? Secondly, can she explain why only three in every 100 crimes are ever brought to justice—even under her Government's figures? Thirdly, can she explain why she considers the drugs policy a success when 80 per cent. of addicts abandon drug treatment orders before they are completed? Fourthly, can she tell us when policemen will spend more time on patrol than on paperwork?

I have to tell the Home Secretary that very few members of the public think that the Government's crime policy is a success. If she thinks it a success, heaven help the country when she thinks it a failure.

Jacqui Smith: Well, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome for quite a few elements of my statement. He is absolutely right about local crime statistics; they are an important way in which we can support local people to engage in partnerships that will help to bring down crime.

The right hon. Gentleman asked some specific questions. First, on drug-related crime, I have made it clear, as today's statistics show, that crime most closely related to drug harm—acquisitive crime—has fallen by 20 per cent. since we introduced drug treatment and testing in prisons. Although there has been an increase in drug offences in the most recent figures, that is largely due to the more proactive approach taken by the police, particularly through the use of cannabis warnings. Young people's use of class A drugs has held stable and their use of cannabis and other drugs has reduced due to the Government's approach.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about licensing. Basing such a sweeping statement on a report from one hospital is unfortunate. Research we have published today shows a 25 per cent. reduction in violent crime in relation to those licensing hours. As I outlined in my statement, we have already taken action on knife crime. It is only since April this year, when my predecessor as Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid), introduced the reporting of offences involving a blade, that we have been able to track such crimes, but we are serious about it, and I spelt out how we shall do it.

[Jacqui Smith]

On ensuring that the police are able to focus on their work; first, this Government's investment has meant that more police officers, and 16,000 police community support officers, are on patrol and working. It is because we take seriously the matter of focusing their attention on the streets that we have asked Sir Ronnie Flanagan, the chief inspector of police, to carry out a review that looks at how we can reduce bureaucracy.

The right hon. Gentleman prides himself on being a tough man in tackling crime—no hoodie-hugging for him. As we have seen too often, when the Opposition are put to the test, they talk tough but vote soft. They voted to water down antisocial behaviour orders, and voted against tougher sentences for murder and sexual and violent offences and against police powers to tackle organised crime. Talk is cheap, which is just as well because it is all that the shadow Chancellor would be willing to fund. Until the right hon. Gentleman can put some backbone into his leader and some economic sense into the shadow Chancellor, his words will ring hollow.

Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye) (Lab): May I applaud my right hon. Friend for the importance that she places on local crime reduction partnerships, such as the exemplary safer Hastings partnership, which has led to massive reductions in crime in Hastings? Seventy per cent. of the people even believe that there has been a reduction. I suppose that that is dreadful because 100 per cent. should believe it.

Recently, before my right hon. Friend took up her office, her predecessor vired specific funds from crime reduction partnerships to terrorism and prisons. Will she reconsider that decision and ascertain whether we can put that cash back?

Jacqui Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend that very good work goes on in our crime reduction partnerships and I know that he has raised the matter with my hon. Friend—soon to be right hon. Friend—the Minister of State, Home Department, the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty).

Despite the increased investment that the Government have found for funding local area agreements—where crime and disorder partnerships sit—and for increased police staff, there will always be tough decisions to make. Given the context of specific protection challenges, especially in counter-terrorism, it was necessary to make a decision this financial year about a small part of the funding for crime reduction partnerships. It will not be possible to put that right this year, but I will consider a range of ways in which we can support the good work of those partnerships in future.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I am obviously grateful to the Home Secretary for advance sight of the statement. She was quick in its early stages to take credit for the reduction in some categories of non-violent crime. Has she read the report of the Prime Minister's strategy unit, which confirms that a full 80 per cent. in those reductions have nothing to do with the Government's law and order policies?

Does the Home Secretary also accept that, if one genuinely wants a strategy to deal with not only crime but the public fear of crime, far from the thin gruel of the statement, she needs to abandon the mix of legislative hyperactivity, policy populism and addiction to mass incarceration, which has the disfigured the Government's approach to law and order for too long? Does she also agree that, for the strategy to be credible, she needs to show how she will deliver on her pledges? How are we to believe that neighbourhood police teams will be rolled out by April 2008 and be sustainable beyond that, when the Government cut by a third the number of promised community support officers? Local authorities throughout the country do not yet know whether they will have to pick up the bill.

Will the Home Secretary explain why the statement is silent on the urgent need to involve victims and communities in the administration of justice? Does she agree that she should work with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to roll out aggressively the excellent community justice panels, which were pioneered in Somerset and elsewhere and give offenders the opportunity to explain themselves to victims and communities?

Will the Home Secretary also explain why the statement is silent about one of the biggest crises in our criminal justice system—the epidemic of reoffending? A full 92 per cent. of young men who go to prison for short-term sentences reoffend in a matter of weeks and months of release.

Does the Home Secretary agree that it is time to tackle the Government's addiction to so-called summary justice? It is a pay-as-you-go approach to justice, which includes the roll-out of penalties and the over-use of cautions and fixed penalty notices, and has done much to damage public confidence and contribute to lamentable conviction rates. The Home Affairs Committee's report today confirmed that now only three out of every 100 crimes lead to a conviction in court.

At first glance, the statement is not a strategy but a rag-bag of unrelated, minor media initiatives, which ignore the fundamental failure in the Government's relentless and shameless populist approach to law and order.

Jacqui Smith: I think that I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I was not quite clear about his first point and I do not think he was, either. Perhaps he was making the case that reductions in crime do not depend solely on investment in law and order and policing, but—dare I say it—on tackling some of the causes of crime. If that was his point, I strongly agree with him. It was precisely the point that I made in the statement. Increased investment in police and tough sentencing when necessary are a crucial part of reducing crime but they are not enough. Tackling unemployment, reducing the harm from drug and alcohol use, ensuring better education and early intervention are also important in reducing crime. They are part of the reason for the reduction in crime that has occurred in the past 10 years.

The hon. Gentleman was right to emphasise the important role of neighbourhood policing teams. I have been fortunate in the past fortnight to see their work on two separate occasions, and, even more important, to talk to local people, who now see what their police officers are doing and feel able to talk to them and work with them to solve problems in their communities. It is important that those neighbourhood teams are in place by next April and embedded in our

system. We have asked Sir Ronnie Flanagan to advise us on that, too. We are serious about the contribution of neighbourhood policing and that is why we have taken it forward.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about involving victims in justice. We have undertaken, and will continue with, that work with the Ministry of Justice. On the subject of his throwaway approach to the range of penalties on offer, I believe that it is a good idea, if possible, to intervene earlier with fixed penalty notices and other forms of punishment and warning at the point when, for example, we can prevent violence from escalating. It is good to have a range of tools at the disposal of those who are responsible for keeping order on our streets. Of course we will keep their use under review, but on the whole, those new initiatives and ways of tackling crime have been successful in the past 10 years, notwithstanding the fact that on almost every occasion, the hon. Gentleman and his party voted against them.

David Wright (Telford) (Lab): I welcome the fall in crime in West Mercia. That is a tribute to the hard work of the police force in my area of Telford. Will my right hon. Friend consider the scale of the house-building programme in the UK? We need more police architectural liaison officers so that we can do more to design out crime in local neighbourhoods. If such a large expansion in housing is going to occur, we need to beef up the team in West Mercia, and throughout the country.

Jacqui Smith: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend about the good work that happens in the West Mercia police area. My part of that area is one of the early developers of some of the neighbourhood policing that it is so important to spread throughout the country. My hon. Friend is right to identify the challenge and the opportunity that increased house building presents. That is why, in the design and technology alliance, we have emphasised working with, for example, John Sorrell from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. We can thus consider how we develop more housing in a way that builds out crime. For example, there is a housing estate in Bradford where a redesign of the way in which the housing operated led to an 80 per cent. reduction in burglary. It is a fruitful subject, and I agree with my hon. Friend that we can do more.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): I am sure that the right hon. Lady is sincere in her expectation that crime will fall in the coming months, but how does that square with the possibility of losing many thousands of police community support officers after April? Will she give hon. Members some assurance about the future funding of that important component of neighbourhood policing?

Jacqui Smith: I am not sure why the hon. Gentleman thinks that we are going to lose PCSOs. There are now 16,000 of them supporting the important work of police officers in neighbourhoods. That is an important development in the crime-fighting family in the past few years. *[Interruption.]* As the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) points out, such provision did not exist 10 years ago, when crime reduction started. It is an important development, and we are committed to continuing with it.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I entirely agree that the publication of local monthly crime statistics is important in proving local police accountability. It is important too, however, that social landlords such as Stockport Homes publish monthly statistics on the actions that they have taken against antisocial tenants, which would improve their accountability to other tenants. Will my right hon. Friend encourage local crime and disorder partnerships to ask their social landlords to publish such statistics?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and identifies what I described in my statement as the whole range of partners whom we need to engage in cutting crime. Local accountability for crime statistics and the other forms of local accountability that she identifies, especially housing, are important.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I invite the Home Secretary to a night out in Kettering? We could spend the night together with the local constabulary chasing the 260 persistent and prolific offenders in Northamptonshire who commit £7 million-worth of crime each year. Residents of Kettering want those people locked up in jail, serving their time in full. How will the Home Secretary prioritise the police to catch, and the courts to convict and lock up, the people who commit the bulk of the crime in this country?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend—sorry, I mean the hon. Gentleman; we are not friends yet, although we might be after our night out in Kettering. *[Interruption.]* Some of my colleagues want to check whether the hon. Gentleman was offering to pay.

The hon. Gentleman's serious point is about not only how the police catch those who commit criminal acts, but how the latter are taken through the courts and convicted. There has been an increase of nearly 40 per cent. in criminal convictions over the past 10 years, as well as a reduction in crime. Considerable progress has been made, but the hon. Gentleman is right: we need the whole approach, from prevention and early intervention to catching criminals and ensuring that we deal with offenders properly, to bring down crime as we have done.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and Northamptonshire police's improved performance, which has benefited the local community. However, one of the continuing problems in tackling antisocial behaviour is the weak housing and estate management of the local authority—now Liberal Democrat controlled. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that all partners pull their weight in partnership working, so that the police do not have to pick up the problems created by other agencies?

Jacqui Smith: I join my hon. Friend in praising the improvements of Northants police. She raises an important point about the responsibility of the police's partners. We want to change the performance management

[Jacqui Smith]

arrangements—so that we measure not only the work of the police, but that of all the partners engaged in the crime reduction partnership in solving crime locally—precisely to identify that responsibility across agencies, which involves not only the police but local authorities, housing management, health services, education and others who contribute. That might make a contribution—and as for the problem of having a Liberal Democrat council, I am sure that my hon. Friend is working hard to put that right.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Given that the British crime survey does not include crimes against those under 16, those who own commercial property or those who live in shared accommodation—nurses, students and the elderly—will the Home Secretary assure the House, and my constituents who have been affected by crime, that the new monthly figures will include those victims?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right about the British crime survey. We have today published not only the statistics in the British crime survey, but the recorded crime statistics. We must work closely with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities, in the way I have described, to develop local crime information. The hon. Gentleman correctly says that the information needs to be broad, to cover all the concerns of local people, and to be comparable between districts.

Anne Snelgrove (South Swindon) (Lab): I welcome in particular my right hon. Friend's comments about building safer schools partnerships and involving young people in neighbourhood policing teams. May I inform her of the success of the Broadgreen pilot neighbourhood policing scheme in my constituency? Its local knowledge of young people helped it to damp down some difficult racial and social tensions earlier this year. Will she give some comfort to three secondary schools, St. Joseph's, Churchfields and The Ridgeway, which are working in partnership but are finding it difficult to secure funding to combat the menace of gang culture?

Jacqui Smith: I join my hon. Friend in praising the Broadgreen neighbourhood policing team. The work to damp down, as she described it, trouble before it becomes more serious is a key part of neighbourhood policing. I cannot promise her money today, but I can say that schools working together, particularly on the initiatives that she described, are part not only of the work that we in the Home Office are doing, but of the work to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is committed. I will certainly look at the scheme that my hon. Friend mentions, to see whether some of the money that we are already making available for supporting ways of reducing gang crime, particularly through the voluntary sector, might be relevant.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The current clear-up rate is three crimes in 100. What would be a satisfactory clear-up rate?

Jacqui Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong; we do not recognise that figure. In fact, as I have already pointed out, convictions have increased by 40 per cent. since 1997, and at the same time there has been a reduction in crimes overall and a reduction in the chances of becoming a victim of crime. There have been more convictions, as a proportion of a smaller amount of crime, and I think that that is a success.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the continuing excellent work of Staffordshire police. Does she recognise and understand that, despite falling levels of crime, my constituents in market towns such as Leek and Biddulph feel that their communities do not receive the attention that they deserve, because they are not seen as crime hot spots? Will she explain how the new neighbourhood approach could help those communities get their fair share of policing?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend is right to praise the work of Staffordshire police. We believe that neighbourhood policing teams need to be made available in every community, including in those that she mentioned, precisely because they can contribute to reducing crime, working in partnership with local people. There might be different challenges in areas such as Leek and others that she mentioned. Nevertheless, community safety and feeling safe in their homes are a crucial part of her constituents' concerns, which the delivery of neighbourhood policing in every community will help to address.

Mr. John Baron (Billericay) (Con): The Home Secretary will not be surprised to learn that my constituents are fed up with rising violent crime, antisocial behaviour and low detection rates. The Government should not hide behind the British crime survey figures, which give only part of the picture; they should scrap the figures and instead rely more on the recorded crime figures, which give a much truer reflection of what is actually happening in constituencies up and down the country. The Government might then be able to do something about the problem.

Jacqui Smith: As I think I have already pointed out, we publish both sets of information, although we need to make that more local and clearer for local people. The hon. Gentleman accuses me of hiding behind figures, but perhaps his constituents will want to ask why he hides behind his and his party's rather poor voting record.

Lynda Waltho (Stourbridge) (Lab): With my right hon. Friend's local knowledge of my constituency, she will know that many of my constituents are employed not only in the local town shops but in the nearby large shopping centre at Merry Hill. Notwithstanding the decrease in crime locally, they are particularly concerned about the levels of violent abuse that they receive. What more can we do to encourage employers and the managers of these organisations to engage with crime reduction partners to tackle this problem?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend is right: I do know her constituency, and the Merry Hill shopping centre. People who work in the retail sector have the right to be safe, and we need to ensure that we tackle crime in those areas. I am particularly impressed by the freedom from fear campaign that has been established by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which I have supported in the past. I think that my hon. Friend was

involved in helping to launch it, and other hon. Friends have also been involved in it. It is a very good example of a union working with those who support it to protect the interests not only of its members but of all those who use our shops.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): I welcome what the Home Secretary has said about doubling the maximum sentence from two to four years for people who carry knives. Will she take it from me, however, that whatever the truth behind the various figures, one reason why public confidence is low is that the policy adopted by the Government of routinely releasing people halfway through their sentence means that someone who receives a four-year sentence knows that they will be out in two years, or sometimes two years minus the time that they have spent on remand? Would it not be better to get back to imposing sentences that mean what they say, while acknowledging—I understand the position on this—that there should be a modest reduction for people who behave well in prison?

Jacqui Smith: First, let me be completely clear that people who are dangerous are not released. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the length of sentences. In fact, on the whole, the length of sentences has increased since 1997. His words would have more resonance with me and others had his party not voted against the indeterminate sentences that we proposed.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): It is striking that the Home Secretary has not yet mentioned the point trailed in the media this morning, that Britain is unique in the degree to which the fear of crime outpaces the reality of crime. I wonder why she has not mentioned that. Could it be that the Government are partly to blame for that situation, especially as the whole basis of new Labour's strategy on crime is never to be outbid by the Conservative party or the *Daily Mail*? Is it not time to replace the strategy of having "no enemies on the right" with a new strategy that bases criminal justice policy on the evidence, rather than on prejudice?

Jacqui Smith: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is not taking an overly party political approach to this serious issue! However, he makes an important point about public perceptions of crime, and he is right to say that a relatively high proportion of people continue to believe that crime is a serious problem. Actually, today's figures show that crime is stable, having fallen by approximately one third since 1998. The most appropriate ways to deal with the fear of crime are, first, to ensure that crime itself falls, which is why a fall of one third in the past 10 years is so significant, and secondly, to give people confidence—through access to local information and through the ability to see and work with neighbourhood policing teams—that their priorities are being addressed in their local area, and that what is happening through local policing and through their own contribution is making a difference.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): This next week sees the 40th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which was introduced by a Welsh Labour MP, Leo Abse. It established the partial legalisation of homosexuality. Much has changed since then, but there are still many cases of homophobic violence and abuse. One young man was killed less than a mile from here; he was beaten to death by several young hooligans. A lot of gay-bashing goes on around the country, and there is evidence to suggest that many gay men are reluctant to report it to the police. My right hon. Friend has a substantial personal record on these issues. Will she consider completing it by introducing a specific offence of homophobic hate crime?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend, too, has an important record on these matters. He is right; violence in any form is completely unacceptable, but when it is linked to the kind of hatred and bigotry that homophobic crime represents, it is even worse. A lot of good work is going on in police forces now, including the work that we are doing with them, to record and to tackle crimes with a homophobic element. We will certainly continue to think carefully about how and whether we need to change the nature of offences to reflect the seriousness of the situation that my hon. Friend has identified.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): If it is not inconvenient, would the Home Secretary stop in Wellingborough on her way to her date with my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone), to meet my constituents, 20 per cent. of whom are afraid to go out at night because of violent crime?

Jacqui Smith *rose—*

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Vernon Coaker): A tempting offer.

Jacqui Smith: What a day it is going to be! [HON. MEMBERS: "And what a night!"] Indeed. However, I must bring my mind back to the important issue before us. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, which I partly addressed when I talked about the way in which we respond to the perception crime. A key part of our strategy must be the visibility of the police and other partners, so that people can see and feel that crime is coming down locally, and so that they do not feel trapped in their homes. This strategy, and the progress that we have already made, are important in ensuring that people have the freedom to live as they want to in their communities.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Home Secretary's statement, especially its emphasis on early intervention and the attempts to crack the inter-generational nature of criminality and deprivation. Does she accept that every pound spent on early intervention programmes, such as the social and emotional aspects of learning, the roots of empathy—which develops empathetic behaviour to inhibit violence—and intensive health visiting, can save perhaps 10 or 15 times that amount from being spent on the tale of underachievement, drug abuse, criminality and a lifetime on benefits? Will she reach out to other Departments to ensure that they play their full part in tackling crime reduction?

Jacqui Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and I commend him for the important work that he is doing in Nottingham, particularly in the area of early intervention. I have had the pleasure of working with him on the development of social and emotional education.

[Jacqui Smith]

In the strategy, we are completely clear about the significance of early intervention, and he is right to say that that job will require not only the resources and efforts of the Home Office but efforts across government. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is already committed to an early intervention approach, and I look forward to being able to look at this issue and others across government through the national crime reduction board, which I will bring together and chair.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): May I therefore appeal to the Home Secretary to display real statesmanship? Given that more than 60 per cent. of the 12,000 people in our young offender institutions suffer from speech, language and communication impairments that prevent them from accessing education, training and anger management courses, and that in that category, the reoffending rate is 80 per cent., will she undertake to work with her right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Justice, for Health, and for Children, Schools and Families to ensure that every young offender institution in the country employs a speech and language therapist, so that those young people can access the help that they need before their lives are permanently blighted?

Jacqui Smith: As a result of our investment in rehabilitation, we have already seen four times as many offenders being taught basic skills in recent years than was the case four years ago. The hon. Gentleman has a strong record of raising the issue of speech and language therapy, which I take seriously, and I will look at the matter that he has raised. He is right to say that this would involve working across government—a commitment that I have already made. I will take this matter very seriously—but I am just disappointed that the hon. Gentleman did not add an invitation to a night out in Buckingham.

Points of Order

2.19 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to see the Leader of the House in her place, and I hope that she is there to respond to the issue that I am about to draw to the House's attention.

During business questions earlier this afternoon, I drew the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 1952, which relates to the leadership of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I pointed out that the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott) was not going to be a shoo-in, as there will be an election for the position, taking place next week. Given that the Council of Europe is all about democracy, I sought the assurance of the Leader of the House that a democratic election would involve every member of the delegation having a vote for its leadership. The answer I received was: yes, that is what would happen.

It is now clear that that answer was factually incorrect. I readily accept that the misleading of this House was totally unintentional. Nevertheless, that answer was wrong, because it is absolutely clear that only Labour members will be able to vote. We will therefore end up with a leader of an all-party delegation chosen on the basis that some of us are disfranchised. I hope that the Leader of the House now wants to correct her mistake and then explain why some of us are effectively second-class members, denied the right to say who will be our leader.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): The Leader of the House is present. Does she wish to respond?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) for raising this point of order and providing me with an opportunity to clarify the position. I can reassure him that we have not changed the procedure in any way, as it remains the case that the leadership of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe is a matter for the Prime Minister.

Mr. Wilshire: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must leave it there. If the hon. Gentleman wants to pursue the matter further, he will have to—

Mr. Wilshire: I simply wanted to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. No, the Leader of the House has responded to the point of order. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to pursue the matter further, he should consider choosing other channels to do so.

Mr. Wilshire: On a different point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would it be a different point of order if I were to thank the Leader of the House for being so prompt in correcting her mistake?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am more than content to accept that point of order. Perhaps we can now move on to the next business.

Zimbabwe

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Michael Foster.]*

2.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Meg Munn): I welcome this debate. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his opposite number fully intended to participate in the debate, until it was clear that it was going to be significantly delayed as a result of ministerial statements and, as of Tuesday, possible Lords amendments. That is when the decision was taken for me to open the debate. We are, of course, seeking a further debate in the autumn, subject to the agreement of the business managers. We will then be able to debate the matter even more fully.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I would like the Minister to clarify exactly what the Foreign Secretary is doing. I know that he has a meeting at 4 o'clock, as the invitations went out last week. However, why is it not possible for him at least to open the debate today? All hon. Members accept how busy he is and would understand if he had to leave, but why has he decided not to open today's debate?

Meg Munn: I do not know exactly what my right hon. Friend is doing at this precise moment, though I know that a number of concerns led him to take the decision, in which he liaised with the Opposition. My hon. Friend will be aware of the issue of Russia, which has demanded my right hon. Friend's attention. She knows, as I do, that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is genuinely honourable and genuinely concerned about issues in Zimbabwe, which are a matter of priority within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Foreign Secretary sincerely regrets not being able to open today's debate. If it were possible for him to be here, he would indeed have been here.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I share the views expressed by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). Does not the Minister agree that the message going out from this House to all those people worldwide who are concerned about Zimbabwe is important? This is the first debate on the subject for three years. I understand that the Foreign Secretary merely has a meeting at Chatham House; and I acknowledge that my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) is not in his place either. Is it not a very sad indictment when they do not see their first priority as this House rather than elsewhere?

Meg Munn: That is not the message that should go out. The issue is a matter of great concern. The former Leader of the House gave the hon. Gentleman a commitment to have a debate on Zimbabwe, which is being fulfilled. I have now made a further commitment—precisely because it is a matter of such concern and because we want to see it debated even more fully—to have another debate, subject to the agreement of the business managers, in the autumn. There are expectations of further decisions over the next few months, which I will outline in greater detail later, which provide a good reason for having a further debate at that time. We wish to arrange that as soon as possible.

I shall now move on to the substance of my speech. As the Prime Minister recently said in Berlin of President Mugabe:

> "We call upon him to respect the civil liberties of the people of Zimbabwe, and we call upon him to end what has been a disastrous period of poverty and, in many cases famine, and also the damage to human rights that has been done in that country."

In my own speech, I will deal with the following issues: the current situation, including the human cost and economic decline; the appalling human rights abuses that have occurred and still are occurring; the response of the region and the Southern African Development Community or SADC initiative; our approach to supporting the people of Zimbabwe and all those now working for democratic change; and the EU-Africa summit.

I hope that all hon. Members can agree on two points: first, that the situation in Zimbabwe today is appalling; and secondly, that the cause of it is the actions of Robert Mugabe's regime. The bare statistics are shocking enough: an economy halved in just seven years; unimaginable levels of inflation well in excess of 15,000 per cent.; an unemployment rate of more than 80 per cent.; a currency that has lost 99.9 per cent of its value in the last four years; and one in every five adults infected with AIDS.

The human misery that lies beneath those statistics is starker still. On average, a Zimbabwean boy born today will be dead before he reaches 37, and a Zimbabwean girl will die even earlier—she will not reach 35. One consequence is that today one in four Zimbabwean children has lost a parent. People are fleeing their homes and their country in the hundreds of thousands. The latest estimate is that more than 2,000 cross the Limpopo every night. Around a quarter of the population has already left. Of those who remain, almost half—more than 4 million people—will need food aid by 2008. Let us not forget where this is all happening. It is happening in a country that was one of the richest in Africa—a country that enjoyed comparatively high standards of living, a booming economy, and some of the best health, education and legal systems in the region.

There can be no doubt where the responsibility for the terrible tragedy in Zimbabwe lies—with President Mugabe and his regime. In the first 10 years after independence, significant gains were made in access to basic services. After 27 years of rule, however, Mugabe's enduring legacy to the people of Zimbabwe is misery, poverty and oppression. Owing to Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe is in the grip of a corrupt culture that has destroyed what was once the bread basket of southern Africa. Since 1998, agricultural productivity has fallen by a staggering 80 per cent. and more than a million people, many of them black commercial farm workers and their families, have lost their livelihoods.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): I do not wish to be discourteous to the Minister, but those of us who regularly attend debates on Africa and Zimbabwe have all those facts burned into our souls. We do not want to hear a recital of Mugabe's crimes and offences; we know about that. We want to hear what Her Majesty's Government and the Foreign Office intend to do.

Meg Munn: I understand entirely that many Members know a great deal about the situation and have spent a lot of time raising such issues. Let us remember, however,

[Meg Munn]

that we are having this debate on the Floor of the House, it will be read widely, and it is right that the Government put the issues on the record. I do so not to avoid answering the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman, but to make absolutely clear how poor the situation is, and what the implications are.

Robert Mugabe's regime has compounded the catastrophic failure of policy at every turn. The mining sector is crippled—gold production is at its lowest ebb since 1917—which has put another 40,000 out of work in the past decade. Today there are reports that Zimbabwe, despite its huge reserves of coal, is having to import from Botswana. Even so, electricity supplies have now become so irregular that those few companies struggling to survive are having to import their own fuel from outside the country.

The new legislation being rushed through the Zimbabwean Parliament tells the same story. If approved, the legislation will make all foreign investors offer up a 51 per cent. shareholding to local investors. No doubt Robert Mugabe will ensure that his supporters receive the benefit while ordinary people suffer. Meanwhile, in 2005, Robert Mugabe added to the misery of the 1 million people displaced from the countryside by destroying the homes or livelihoods of 700,000 people living in the cities. He has refused to appeal to the UN for food aid, and has persistently ignored the advice of the International Monetary Fund on how to rescue his nose-diving economy.

I am sorry to report to the House that the latest news coming out of Zimbabwe shows that Robert Mugabe is set on pursuing yet more disastrous policies. The ill-thought-out and economically illiterate Operation Reduce Prices is resulting in panic-buying, empty shelves and looting. The few remaining businesses and manufacturers are closing. As might have been expected, such a clumsy attempt to manipulate market forces is simply driving consumers elsewhere—to the black market. As is always the case, those in the best position to take advantage of such an underground economy are the political elite.

Zimbabwe is grinding to a halt, while Robert Mugabe and his regime continue to close their eyes to the suffering.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): I set up an organisation, in which the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) is also involved, which provides ongoing support for HIV/AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe. Does my hon. Friend recognise that the people in Zimbabwe place enormous value on the support and solidarity that comes from the UK? That is why the seniority of the ministerial presence in the House, and the level at which the Government engage and seek to put pressure on Zimbabwe, is so important, both in trying to stop Robert Mugabe and in giving some hope and heart to the people who are suffering most under that regime.

Meg Munn: I understand what my hon. Friend is saying, and accept the reasons behind it. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary completely supports the actions being taken, and takes the matter very seriously. The issue is being given priority. I hope that that will reassure the people of Zimbabwe to whom my hon. Friend has referred.

There is only one way in which a regime that is so incompetent and venal can survive—by denying the people the freedom to change it. Robert Mugabe and his regime depend on brutality and oppression for their survival. Since 11 March, when a young Zimbabwean was shot dead and opposition and civil society leaders bludgeoned, the number of opposition activists arrested and beaten throughout Zimbabwe has continued to grow.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Given that the president of the Law Society of Zimbabwe, Beatrice Mtetwa, an extremely distinguished human rights lawyer, and Lovemore Madhuku, the chair of the National Constitutional Assembly, both of whom I had the privilege of meeting as long ago as February 2004, are just two of the people who, on more than one occasion, have been arrested and savagely beaten by the fascistic forces of Mugabe's regime, does the Minister agree that President Mugabe should under no circumstances be allowed to attend the EU-African Union summit, and if he does, that our Prime Minister will boycott that pointless and thoroughly insensitive charade?

Meg Munn: I understand entirely the hon. Gentleman's point. If he will bear with me, I said at the outset that I would refer to the issue, and I will do so.

In early June, lawyers peacefully protesting outside the high court were attacked and a leading female human rights lawyer was badly beaten in public. In the same month, police used batons against some 200 members of the group Women of Zimbabwe Arise who were protesting peacefully in Bulawayo. Seven of their members were detained and denied access to lawyers. They were held for several nights in degrading conditions before being released without charge. In the past, some of their members have been arrested and detained with their babies.

Just last week, it was the turn of Zimbabwe's students: when they protested against the forced eviction of 5,000 students from their halls of residence, hundreds were beaten and injured by riot police. All that, of course, is set against the backdrop of the continued persecution of opposition politicians, including Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara, the rigging of elections, the systematic crushing of Zimbabwe's free media and the use of food, fuel and land as tools of political repression.

The meltdown in Zimbabwe is a tragedy for the people of that country, but it is also a problem for the entire region. The repeated lesson of history is that the impacts of state failure will always migrate across borders. It is therefore undoubtedly in the interests of African nations to find and lead the solution to the problems in the country. We will support them in that effort.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend, East) (Con): What representations has the Minister received in relation to the Southern African Development Community supporting Zimbabwe, and specifically South Africa, in relation to expanding the rand's monetary area and the customs union to include Zimbabwe at some point?

Meg Munn: I shall refer shortly to the role of SADC.

Zimbabwe's neighbours are already feeling the negative economic and social consequences of the exodus of Zimbabweans. It is putting added strain on their social and welfare structures. Zimbabwe's neighbours are having to deal with HIV/AIDS patients, malnutrition, safety and security problems. In turn, that is causing tension within their own populations. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke to his South African counterpart last week. They discussed the more than 2 million refugees already in South Africa—the last thing that South Africa needs—and the damage that Zimbabwe's failure is doing to its neighbours' economies. There are clear signs that the capacity of Zimbabwe's neighbours to absorb those fleeing the country is approaching its limit. South Africa has returned more than 100,000 irregular migrants in the first six months of this year, which is twice the rate of the previous year.

The regional consequences of Robert Mugabe's destructive approach are one compelling reason for the need for African leadership. The other, equally compelling, is that it is African countries and African leaders who have the greatest influence on the government of Zimbabwe. That is why we support a more active stance by the Southern African Development Community. We have been encouraging progress under President Mbeki's leadership to promote dialogue between ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. President Mbeki updated the Prime Minister earlier this month, and there have been numerous ministerial level contacts with other SADC leaders as the situation in Zimbabwe has worsened.

We are expecting President Mbeki to report on progress to fellow SADC leaders at the summit in Lusaka set for mid-August. This is the opportunity for them to make a difference. However, I would not be being frank with this House if I did not say that ZANU-PF representatives have repeatedly failed to turn up for talks, and this is not encouraging. Robert Mugabe must not think that the SADC initiative can be used as a smokescreen to distract the opposition and his neighbours while he prepares the ground in Zimbabwe for another set of crooked elections. It would be a catastrophe, not just for Zimbabwe but for the region, if Zimbabwe suffered its fourth manipulated elections in a row next year. SADC has itself agreed high-quality standards for its elections. So we will support its efforts to put its stated commitment to promoting good governance and to respecting human rights and the rule of law into effect. It is only through such regional engagement that the situation can be prevented from deteriorating further.

African leadership is key. It helps to undercut one of the great sustaining myths of the regime's propaganda effort—that international concern is colonialism by another name. We in this country must be particularly adroit in how we approach this problem. As the opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, made clear on British television just a few months ago:

> "The British government cannot be seen to be at the forefront of confronting Mugabe, alone ... that will be misconstrued as a colonial resuscitation of the same situation again. So Britain has to act together with the rest of the international community and the AU".

However, none of that is to deny the very specific historic connection that we have with the people of Zimbabwe; and it is concern for them which drives our policy. Our approach is twofold. We want to see Zimbabwe back on the road to recovery. We want a reforming Government who pursue sensible and just policies. We want the people to have a chance to choose their Government freely. But until that time, we will do all that we can to relieve the suffering of the people of that country through a significant humanitarian aid programme.

Let me inform the House of the specific measures that we are taking to keep up the pressure and maintain the international spotlight on Robert Mugabe's regime.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): The Minister mentioned the Government's aid programme. May I declare an interest? I am the unremunerated adviser to the Overseas Service Pensioners Association. At the time of Zimbabwe's independence, a group of men and women were assured by the British Government that if they remained in post as civil servants in Zimbabwe their pension entitlements would be honoured. They are people in the most abject poverty. They are our kith and kin. It is shocking that we are not diverting some of the aid to those people. For the reasons that I have stated, they are our kith and kin, and they are some of the poorest. Does the Minister have any plans to review the situation? It is a crime on all of us to have let those people, who were so instrumental in helping the transition from white minority rule to the independent Zimbabwe, fall into this abject poverty.

Meg Munn: We take our duty of care and responsibility for British nationals in Zimbabwe very seriously. We provide a full consular service in Harare. We are making efforts to ensure that all British nationals, including those who are vulnerable and elderly, are aware of the assistance that we and other organisations can offer them. The embassy is making particular efforts to identify and support those who are infirm or elderly and who may find it harder to access consular assistance.

The hon. Gentleman has raised very specific questions about a particular group of people. I hope that we may be able to provide information to him a little later in the debate.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The Minister has referred to ex-pat United Kingdom citizens. There is a significant white population who regard themselves fundamentally as British, but hold Zimbabwean passports. I have a constituent who was brought up in the United Kingdom by foster parents, but still holds a Zimbabwean passport. There is no exit route for her. Our own Government deny her access to what she regards as her own country. Is it not time that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office got together and made sure that there was a plan for these people?

Meg Munn: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says about plans to support people from Zimbabwe; there are extensive plans.

The measures that we are taking have the support of Zimbabwean civil society organisations because they are, rightly, focused on Mugabe and his elite, not the people of Zimbabwe. As a direct response to the Government-orchestrated violence in March, we added further names to the EU's travel ban and assets-freeze list. The EU ban on arms sales and the EU travel ban

[Meg Munn]

and assets freeze on 131 leading members of the regime remain in place. However, there are no economic sanctions, despite regime propaganda to the contrary, because of the damage they would do to ordinary Zimbabweans. The greatest sanction on the Zimbabwean economy is the policy of the Zimbabwean Government themselves.

Kate Hoey: Is it the position of Her Majesty's Government to support Australian Prime Minister John Howard's decision to order the Australian cricket team not to play Zimbabwe? What is the Government's position on sporting links with Zimbabwe?

Meg Munn: I find it hard to understand why anyone would want to go and play cricket in Zimbabwe. There are currently no sporting sanctions on Zimbabwe, but international sport should never be a way for dictators to publicise their misrule. We would not want the England cricket team to tour there. It is a matter for the English cricketing authorities to decide ultimately whether England play Zimbabwe or not. Our views are clear.

Let me also say a few words about the EU-Africa summit. We have stated very clearly to all concerned that this Government is committed to Africa and the EU-Africa relationship. Indeed, we launched the EU-Africa partnership strategy in 2005 under the UK Presidency. Above all, we want a summit this year that delivers real results for Africa. We do not want anything to overshadow this work, including Robert Mugabe. We want a solution that is consistent with the EU's common position on Zimbabwe and with what the EU and Africa want to achieve together on governance. We believe that any conference that goes ahead should, in our view, include a specific discussion on the situation in Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to shine the UN spotlight on Mugabe's human rights abuses. We pushed for fifty countries to condemn him at the Human Rights Council in March and we will push for Zimbabwe to be back on September's agenda. I would like to take this opportunity to praise the many other groups working in the region and in this country—NGOs, church groups, women's groups and some trade unions in particular—to document and draw attention to the abuses of the regime.

Ms Keeble: What discussions are the Government having with China about what it is doing in Zimbabwe—its financial support is propping up the regime—particularly in terms of access to fuel?

Meg Munn: There are always many rumours that China and other states are providing loans or support to Zimbabwe and we know that Robert Mugabe is always looking for lifelines to keep him afloat. We have discussed with China how it engages with Africa and Zimbabwe specifically. We want China to support the new African agenda led by Africans, and we will continue to consult at a bilateral and EU level.

Kate Hoey: I do not think that my hon. Friend responded to an earlier Opposition question that I would also like to ask. What is the position of the Government on any EU country—Portugal, which holds the presidency, in particular—asking Robert Mugabe to come to the EU-African Union conference?

Meg Munn: The meeting is planned for later in the year and we have made our position clear on this. We are in discussions and there needs to be a solution to the matter. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members want me to tell them what will happen in a few months' time. I am not in a position to tell them, but we are clear that we do not want the summit to be overshadowed by Robert Mugabe.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Con): The Minister is not being particularly helpful on this matter. On 15 July, *The Sunday Times* reported:

> "Gordon Brown will refuse to attend a forthcoming summit of European Union and African leaders in Lisbon if Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe is invited."

The House is seeking confirmation from the Minister not only that the Prime Minister will refuse to attend the summit if Mugabe is invited, but that so will the Foreign Secretary and all other British Ministers.

Meg Munn: I entirely understand why Members are asking such questions, but what I can say is that we are working with the EU and African partners on a solution that is consistent with the EU common position on Zimbabwe and with what the EU is seeking to achieve on governance. It is important that the conference go ahead, but we do not want it to be overshadowed by Robert Mugabe and we want any solution to be consistent with the EU common position.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind *rose—*

John Bercow *rose—*

Meg Munn: I will take one more intervention on this issue.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but I must tell her that she has not answered the question. As I said, *The Sunday Times* reported that the Prime Minister had already made it clear that he would not attend the summit under such circumstances. If the Minister refuses to repeat that assurance, that will imply that the Government are equivocal on the matter, which will send the wrong signal not only to Harare but, equally importantly, to Lisbon. It is important that the Minister today state clearly and unambiguously that the Prime Minister will not attend the EU summit if Mr. Mugabe is invited.

Meg Munn: I had intended to give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow), but the right hon. and learned Gentleman was quicker on his feet—that might teach the hon. Gentleman a lesson.

I am being as clear as I can be on this matter, and it is very clear where the Government stand in respect of Robert Mugabe. I have set out at length our views on this situation: we are working with EU and African partners on a solution that is consistent with the EU common position on Zimbabwe. I cannot answer any more questions on the matter, as I would merely be repeating myself.

While maintaining and tightening political pressure, we are providing targeted humanitarian assistance.

John Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Meg Munn: May I make a little more progress? I know that I told the hon. Gentleman to be quicker on his feet, but he might on this occasion have risen a little too quickly.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development would have expanded further on the issue of such assistance in closing the debate—which he wished to do—were he not currently in Sudan dealing with another pressing problem with which Members will be familiar. However, I can inform Members that we are one of the three largest donors to Zimbabwe, and that UK money is helping to keep hundreds of thousands of people alive. Last year, we committed more than £33 million to humanitarian programmes, including food aid. In the last five years we have given £35 million to tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and we have committed a further £47 million for the next three years.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Meg Munn: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham.

John Bercow: I thank the Minister for giving way. All she needed to say on the summit was that if Mugabe does attend, our Prime Minister will not.

On the travel ban issue, I simply ask that given that the governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Gideon Gono, is responsible for the 10,000 per cent. inflation that is wrecking the lives of millions of Zimbabweans, why on earth is he not banned from entering our country? He is thoroughly unwelcome.

Meg Munn: I understand that we are seeking to do something about that. If the hon. Gentleman will give me a few moments, I shall flick through my brief and try to find some information that might allow me to respond more precisely to his question, but first let me finish what I have to say about aid.

Baroness Vadera announced yesterday in another place that we will commit a further £50 million over the next five years to continue the protracted relief programme in Zimbabwe. That will enable continuing provision of social protection in the form of agricultural inputs, water and sanitation, training and home-based care for some 2 million of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Zimbabwe. Our aid is channelled through United Nations and NGO agencies, not via the Government. Our food aid is not a part of the ZANU-PF programme to use food as a means to force support or to punish opposition. We are also spending another £3.3 million this year supporting civil society and organisations working to promote good governance and open democratic space.

I can now respond to the point raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham. On the Reserve Bank governor, Gideon Gono, we have argued for what the hon. Gentleman asks, but other EU partners have not supported us on it. We are clear that he is not welcome in the UK.

Of course, we have a particular responsibility for those British nationals still residing in or visiting Zimbabwe. Their welfare is a prime concern. We provide a full consular service in Harare and we maintain a network of consular correspondents to ensure that we keep in close touch with our nationals in other urban and rural areas. We have a comprehensive and regularly updated contingency plan that covers the 12,000 nationals registered with the British embassy, including the elderly and vulnerable.

The country and people of Zimbabwe are being driven into the ground by the policies of a corrupt and brutal regime. Zimbabwe can recover, but only if the policies are in place to permit it. The UK stands ready to help substantially with Zimbabwe's recovery. I know that many of the Zimbabwean diaspora are anxious to return to Zimbabwe and play their part.

James Duddridge: The Minister says that the governor is not welcome in the UK. For the sake of clarity, can she tell us whether that means he is subject to a travel ban? Many people are not welcome here, but that does not mean that they are subject to a travel ban.

Meg Munn: I hope to clarify that point later for the hon. Gentleman, but my understanding is that other EU member states did not support our view on that, so the governor is not on the EU visa ban list. We are working, through the EU, on a common position and making our views clear.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: The whole House is grateful to the Minister for being so generous in giving way, and we recognise the great difficulties with which she is trying to wrestle. I wish to return to the point that I made earlier about the overseas pensioners. The note that the Minister was sent did not address the point at issue. I am specifically asking for an undertaking today that some part of the £33 million of aid will be specifically earmarked for those whose continued service through independence was responsible for reassuring the white community that there would be some stability after independence. The fact that they honoured their commitment to stay on led to the successful transition. Lord Trefgarne wrote that the independence constitution provides

"full safeguards for public service pensions and their remittability".

That has not happened, and I ask the Minister for an undertaking today that those people will be looked after through the British taxpayers' money that is going to Zimbabwe. Let us earmark some of it for those people.

Meg Munn: The hon. Gentleman mentioned £33 million, but I think that I said £3.3 million. I will clarify that point, but I do not want to commit more money than we have in our coffers on my first outing at the Dispatch Box on this subject.

On independence, state pensions for civil servants in Zimbabwe became the responsibility of the Zimbabwe Government, and there has been no change in that position. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are making every effort to support those British nationals who are vulnerable and whose pensions have become worthless as a consequence of Robert Mugabe's economic policy. Those people are being treated in the same way as other British nationals in Zimbabwe.

I will give way to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) in a moment, but the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James

[Meg Munn]

Duddridge) asked about the money situation. As yet, there are no formal proposals for Zimbabwe to join the rand zone. At this stage, little apart from a complete reversal of Robert Mugabe's economic policies would slow down the country's economic decline.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I appreciate that the Minister has faced huge difficulties in coming to the Dispatch Box to debate a subject of which she has little knowledge, and I think that the whole House sympathises and understands. However, is she not aware that it was the UK and not Europe that brought Mr. Mugabe to power? That means that we should take more responsibility, so why do we not impose a ban on the governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, irrespective of the views of other European countries? That would set an example to others, and make it clear that the man cannot come to the UK because he is unwelcome and undesirable.

Meg Munn: I am not sure how to respond, as I think that I was being damned with faint praise by the hon. Gentleman. Although I certainly bow to the extensive knowledge of Zimbabwe displayed by other hon. Members, I would not describe my situation quite as he did.

For the first 10 or so years of his regime, Robert Mugabe pursued progressive policies—

Sir Nicholas Winterton: What about the 1983 Matabeleland massacre?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order.

Meg Munn: I hesitate to say that problems did not arise, but the situation in Zimbabwe at the outset of Mr. Mugabe's regime was very different from what it is today. However, I think that I have made clear the Government's position in respect of the governor of the Reserve Bank.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): I hope that it will assist my hon. Friend the Minister if I suggest that she need not bow too deeply to the extensive knowledge of these matters displayed by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), as the UK did not bring Mr. Mugabe to power. He came to power as the result of a free election in Zimbabwe. In so far as we had any influence, we backed Bishop Muzorewa, who got 3 per cent. of the vote.

Meg Munn: I am very happy to bow to my hon. Friend's greater knowledge, although I was referring to the collective expertise displayed by the House. However, this debate is not about who knows most. We should be considering what it is right for us to do, what we are doing, and how we can continue to press the matter. As I said at the outset, our policies do not end here, by any means. Further aid to Zimbabwe was announced only yesterday, and there is a SADC meeting in August. It will be appropriate for the House to discuss this matter again when we return from the summer recess.

John Bercow *rose—*

Meg Munn: I give way for the final time to the hon. Gentleman who is so light on his feet.

John Bercow: I am extremely grateful, and I am sorry to press this point but it is important. Gideon Gono is both a craven lickspittle of Mugabe and the architect of the destruction of the livelihoods of millions of Zimbabweans. Why on earth can we not unilaterally impose a ban on his coming to this country? Which EU member states stand in the way of more robust and concerted action? I think we should be told.

Meg Munn: I will try to be robust in response. Gideon Gono is not welcome in the UK. He does not intend to travel here, and we do not intend to let him come.

I end by saying that a major change of direction is needed, and a major change of policy. Only then can the situation in Zimbabwe be reversed. We do not believe that Robert Mugabe is willing or able to change and, more importantly, nor do the people of Zimbabwe. We will continue to do everything that we can to ensure that their voice is heard, so that Zimbabwe can enjoy new leadership and a new start.

2.54 pm

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): May I begin by welcoming the Minister to her first debate at the Dispatch Box? She was generous in giving way to hon. Members. She managed to stick to a pretty feeble script provided by the Foreign Office. Those of us who have served in Departments know only too well the kind of script that will often have in brackets: "If pressed", "If really pressed", "Under no circumstances admit this" and—the biggest joke of all—when one turns the page, "You're on your own now."

Tony Baldry: Can my hon. Friend tell me one thing that the Minister said that we should welcome? Has not the House today witnessed a rather terrifying sight? It sounded like we had a Foreign Office Minister who felt unable to say anything on a line to take, because the Foreign Office seems to be groping desperately for an EU common position. Until they have found their EU common position, Ministers at the Foreign Office do not seem able to tell us what Her Majesty's Government actually think. It was a pathetic performance.

Mr. Simpson: As usual, my hon. Friend states delicately what a number of colleagues have felt and expressed. Although I may have begun my reply with a lightness of touch, what he and other hon. Members have touched on is a very serious situation. I have no intention of reading out the long litany of things that President Mugabe has done or of setting out the appalling circumstances in Zimbabwe. I wish to concentrate on the fact that Zimbabwean society is close to breaking, that the situation there is likely to explode among the neighbouring countries, and that—to pick up the point that my hon. Friend mentioned—it is difficult to establish from the Minister's comments what the policy of Her Majesty's Government actually is and what they intend to do about the crisis.

The international community must accept that the stand that it has taken against Mugabe has proved

almost totally ineffective. The build-up of pressure has been weakened by a lack of cohesion between states which firmly oppose the Mugabe regime and states which are unprepared to stand directly against it. President Mugabe has been able to circumvent attempts to isolate both his Government and him personally by exploiting those divisions. At every opportunity, he has attempted to use a distorted view of Zimbabwe's historical relationship with Britain to peddle the fable that it is only he who bravely stands against the interference of a former colonial power.

I recognise that, amazingly, Mugabe is still regarded as a hero of the anti-colonial struggle by many Zimbabweans and by those living in neighbouring countries, but recognising that does not mean that we have feebly to accept the fact that we in Britain cannot argue the case forcefully, recognising our colonial heritage. We have a direct moral, economic and political interest in the peoples of Zimbabwe and, indeed, the future of south Africa. If we do not recognise that, we deserve to be a minor European power.

Mr. Gale: Would my hon. Friend include in that responsibility a responsibility for former colonials and Zimbabwean passport holders—the sons and daughters of people who went out from this country and helped to make that country once great?

Mr. Simpson: I would hope that any British Government would look with a great deal of favour on those people. If nothing else, we have a moral responsibility to them and a responsibility in relation to their potential fate in Zimbabwe.

Mugabe has consistently managed to foil diplomatic attempts to bring political change in Zimbabwe while —unfortunately—profiting from the protective umbrella of African states which help to keep him at arm's length from the demands of the international community. However, those very African states that will bear the brunt of the social and political fallout in the event of Zimbabwe's collapse. As the Minister pointed out, large numbers of refugees are already moving into the neighbouring countries of South Africa, Botswana and Malawi, and the potential for regional destabilisation is growing.

What estimates have the Government made of the number of refugees who are pouring into each of those countries and what is the Government's assessment of the countries' capacity to cope with any surge in the numbers fleeing? The international community must be ready to assist the south African countries and plan a response to the possible humanitarian crisis that looms ever closer. What international assistance would be provided in the event of a desperate humanitarian situation? What discussions have the Government held at the UN and with our European partners about this subject?

One of our many concerns is the security and well-being of UK passport holders in Zimbabwe. Will the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), tell the House how many UK passport holders are residing in Zimbabwe? Furthermore, if the internal situation breaks down into wider disorder, what are the Government's contingency plans to protect or evacuate those people? I am trying to keep to specific factual questions. I would have hoped that the Foreign Office might have thought that hon. Members would ask such questions. I look to the Minister to reply to some of them during his winding-up speech.

For such reasons, now, more than ever, the international community must ensure that concerted pressure is brought to bear on the regime to hasten the return of democracy. Mugabe's position internally is increasingly precarious, and there are signs of factions developing in ZANU-PF, his party. In that context, the redoubling of efforts across a broad coalition of countries could undoubtedly help to strengthen the existing forces for change.

One of the most pertinent points that has been raised during the debate is whether President Mugabe will be invited to attend the EU-African Union summit later this year. I understand only too well that the British Government wish, as far as possible, to line up with their EU partners. Considerable strength will arise from that. However, given what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) said about the Prime Minister's alleged comments, many people will have found it incredible that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs was unable to say that the British Government's preferred option was for President Mugabe not to attend the conference. That should be the Government's preferred option. It would find support across the House and send a powerful message to Mugabe and his henchmen.

Surely possible disadvantages would be outweighed by the implications of Mugabe's attendance. Allowing him to attend would be wholly inconsistent with the EU common position that bans 140 of Mugabe's henchmen and officials from travelling. We know that he will exploit the occasion for all it is worth to show Zimbabweans that he is still fêted and welcomed by the international community. We must send the signal that the destruction that he has wrought on his own people cannot be tolerated not only by Britain, a former colonial power, but the whole of the EU. Successive British Prime Ministers have talked about putting Britain at the centre of Europe. On this issue, let us at least put ourselves firmly at the centre of the EU, set an example and damn the others to follow us.

In May, in reply to the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Minister for the Middle East wrote:

> "We will look to the Presidency for a solution on Zimbabwean attendance that is consistent with the EU Common Position on Zimbabwe."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2007; Vol. 460, c. 504W.]

Will the Under-Secretary explain in more detail during his winding-up speech what outcome the Government would consider to be consistent with the EU common position? What steps will the Government take to ensure that Mugabe cannot attend? Will the Minister assure the House that none of the representatives of Mugabe's Government who is on the EU travel ban list will be allowed to attend? Will the Minister tell us whether the Prime Minister gave a commitment that he will not attend the conference if President Mugabe attends? Will he give us a clear yes or no?

[Mr. Keith Simpson]

International sanctions justifiably target the influential figures at the heart of the regime in Zimbabwe—those who continue to prosper at the direct expense of the general populace. We understand that whatever action Britain takes should be carried out through the mechanism of the European Union because that will refute Mugabe's argument that Britain, the former colonial power, is the driving force. Unfortunately, sanctions have lacked a direct impact to affect the attitudes of those who could force Mugabe to change his course. As the Minister said, fewer than 130 individuals linked to the Mugabe regime are subject to a travel ban and asset freeze under EU sanctions. Will the Government clarify whether they believe that 130 individuals accurately reflects the number of people responsible for conducting Mugabe's operations across the wide network of governmental departments and bodies, and police, youth-militia and intelligence services?

Following the violence that took place against opposition politicians in Zimbabwe four months ago, the UK Government said:

"We are pushing for, and expect there to be, progress on the addition of extra names to the EU visa ban list".—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 1164.]

However, since then, only a handful of names have been included, and that can hardly be described as a substantial advance. The one person whose name is continually mentioned in debates on the subject—Gideon Gono, the governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, who is responsible for the country's treasury and who controls almost all the economic Ministries—does not appear on the EU list, although it appears on the lists drawn up by New Zealand and the United States. Why is it not on the EU list, and why have the British Government not told our European colleagues that that is totally and utterly unacceptable?

In a letter of 21 July to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks, the Foreign Secretary's predecessor said that the UK would press the EU to add Mr. Gono's name to the EU list. Will the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs tell the House why those representations failed? Did the EU say, "Not now; we are not prepared to do that. Come back later"? Will those representations be revived, or does the EU lack the resolve to deal with the matter?

Surely the time has come for a wider asset freeze and travel ban, covering all family members and business associates of the people who are already on the list, and surely EU visas and residence permits should be cancelled. It is well known that many family members of Zimbabwean Government officials on the EU travel ban list reside in EU countries. It would significantly strengthen the EU common position if we revoked those rights of residence. Additionally, the institutions in Zimbabwe that are instruments of the Government and their members should be made subject to the EU assets freeze. It is crucial that the Mugabe regime and those closest to it start to feel the personal cost of the devastation that they are inflicting on their country.

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that the outgoing American ambassador to Zimbabwe, Christopher Dell, has made clear his Government's commitment to introducing just such a ban? That gives a strong message to the coterie of thugs who run Zimbabwe, and my hon. Friend is right to press the Government on his very similar point.

Mr. Simpson: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I read the report to which he refers, which was robust. It is an example to the British Government and our EU neighbours. Given the hugely destabilising impact that Zimbabwe's collapse would have on the region, its neighbours seem to be displaying a regrettable lack of foresight and urgency. The outcome of an extraordinary summit held by the Southern African Development Community in Tanzania this March was indeed extraordinary, if not rather unbelievable. The summit's participants refused publicly to criticise Mugabe, and instead reaffirmed their 'solidarity', while appealing for the end of

"all forms of sanctions against Zimbabwe".

One result of the summit was that President Mbeki of South Africa was appointed to mediate a political settlement between the Government of Zimbabwe and their opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. His efforts are to be wholeheartedly supported, but it must be noted that it was the fifth time since 2000 that the SADC had asked President Mbeki to facilitate political dialogue in Zimbabwe, and it came long after his admission in 2004 that his quiet diplomacy had failed. As our former Prime Minister Tony Blair stated, the solution will ultimately have to come from Africa, but the international community must do whatever it can to encourage the process.

Political negotiation and collaboration between the main political parties will be vital to any transition towards democratic reform. Britain can assist in that effort, but fresh impetus desperately needs to be injected into the diplomatic attempts to nurture that political process. In the absence of stronger support from the wider southern Africa leaders, the task has proven too difficult for a succession of distinguished figures, including the previous President of Tanzania, the former Mozambican President, the Nigerian leader and the former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. It seems to many of us that large numbers of members of the international community are wringing their hands and passing around messages of support, but not taking any action.

President Mbeki's latest arbitration attempt has not had an auspicious start: ZANU-PF representatives have failed to turn up to talks in Pretoria on three separate occasions. Mugabe shows no serious sign of taking the initiative, and while he stalls, life for millions of Zimbabweans becomes ever more desperate.

Do not the Government share our concern that events are moving at such a fast pace that the country's rapidly plummeting economy may render the talks irrelevant, and, indeed, may render the Government's statement this afternoon irrelevant? What steps are the Government taking in conjunction with their European counterparts and the AU to support President Mbeki's endeavours and persuade him to intensify them? What role is the UK High Commissioner in South Africa, a former Government Minister, taking in all this? He is a distinguished, diplomatic and feline politician who, I would imagine, could put his good offices at the disposal of the international community. Does the Minister have any confidence that the current set of talks will succeed, given the urgency of the situation?

Local pressure will be decisive in influencing events in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, experience has shown that the solidarity and mutual interests of states within the SADC continue to outweigh objections that they may have regarding Mugabe's rule. Mugabe has not only consistently avoided any significant pressure from his neighbours and resisted the advances of quiet diplomacy, but he has used his African alliance to deter escalation through the UN Security Council.

By any estimate, there remain clear gaps as well as weaknesses in the international consensus. The UK Government's aim to achieve international solidarity must be deemed to be failing until more progress can be made to bring the members of the SADC on board. Have the Government given any thought to how the Commonwealth might be engaged to play a constructive role in the crisis? Although Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth in 2003 after suspension from the councils, its neighbouring countries are all members. Does the Minister therefore agree that the Commonwealth is uniquely positioned to take action and exert influence on the neighbours of Zimbabwe and make certain that Zimbabwe remains at the top of the Commonwealth agenda?

The detrimental long-term effects of tolerating the Mugabe regime need to be strongly and clearly laid out. The international community must succeed in convincing Zimbabwe's neighbours that a failed state in their near proximity is a threat to their best interests. In the coming months, the burden of humanitarian and social collapse, as well as economic demise, will increasingly fall on Zimbabwe's neighbours—South Africa, Botswana, Malawi and others. Britain must convince them that protecting a failing regime is short-sighted, in view of the awaiting economic and humanitarian cost, and will only hinder the future development of the whole region. The kind of statement that the Minister had to read out this afternoon is not exactly a trumpet call to taking action against Zimbabwe. It is a rather muted, strangled whine that will have no influence whatever on Zimbabwe or its neighbours.

Careful consideration must be given to initiating International Criminal Court investigations into the atrocities committed by Mugabe and members of his regime. Earlier this year, the then Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) said:

> "The ICC is the next stage; the first stage, which we must concentrate on, is the process of engaging with front-line states and people internally in Zimbabwe to get a new regime and a new Government following agreed democratic principles."—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 1175.]

It goes without saying that everyone in the House would dearly love to witness the completion of stage 1 as he outlined, but we must also consider whether bringing legal proceedings forward might leave those indicted in no doubt of their accountability to international law, and perhaps provide them with the clearest view yet of the end-game approaching.

Finally, it is vital that the international community presents a united front in pursuing a clear strategy that increases the penalties on the Zimbabwean leaders, while showing that there is another way open if those who support them change their course.

John Bercow: Is my hon. Friend not also concerned about the reckless deportation under the auspices of the Home Office of a number of failed Zimbabwean asylum seekers, with the consequence that they are seriously at risk of arrest, imprisonment, torture, death or a grisly combination of all four? Does he agree that it is lamentable that a constituent of mine was told that he could safely be removed to Zimbabwe because, although he supported the MDC, he was not an office-holder in the MDC? Does that not show a degree of ignorance of the sheer viciousness of the Zimbabwean regime, as well as the extensiveness of its intelligence operations?

Mr. Simpson: As usual, my hon. Friend speaks with great passion on this. Given what is going on in Zimbabwe—the actions of the Government, across the piece, against Opposition leaders, local people and business men, a legal system that does not work, and the actions of police and paramilitaries—the idea of deporting anybody is absolutely wrong. I hope that the Minister can assure us that the Government will look again at any cases that they have before them.

The kind of pressure that I have been outlining could be achieved by defining a set of US and EU incentives and disincentives to accompany the sanctions, with specific benchmarks on Zimbabwe's progress. We must make it clear that the international community stands ready to support and assist Zimbabwe if its leadership is prepared to make the dramatic change needed to give the country a truly democratically elected Government. I cannot see any circumstances in which President Mugabe is going to give in to such sanctions. He will step down only if members of his own coterie and political party remove him in one way or another, or if he is persuaded to do so through pressure from the powerful leaders of neighbouring countries who force him to recognise that his only way out is a retirement home in some third country where he will be given a suitable pension. Although I would regret his receiving such a pension, that would be in line with one or two other tyrants who have ruled in post-colonial Africa.

The international community must now take firm steps in a concerted manner, and many of us look to the British Government to take the lead. We should work closely with international partners to widen the EU sanctions list to include family members and business associates of the regime. Adding the governor of the reserve bank to the list and subjecting institutions in Zimbabwe that are instruments of the Government, and their members, to the same controls are ways in which further pressure can be applied to the regime's Ministers and officials. A refusal to issue President Mugabe with an invitation to the EU/AU summit later this year would send a very plain message. If that is not possible, our Prime Minister should refuse to attend that summit. We should also consider action by the International Criminal Court and persuade southern African countries and institutions such as the AU and the Commonwealth to exploit their many points of influence with the Mugabe regime, which would squeeze his room for manoeuvre.

The spectre of disaster has hung over Zimbabwe for too long. Many of us have received messages, e-mails and letters from constituents who have friends and relatives there. We have a duty not only because of our colonial past but because of our international role. I

[Mr. Keith Simpson]

genuinely believe that the Minister made the best she could of her script, but I am afraid that it was, at least for Conservative Members, totally unacceptable.

3.18 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I share other Members' concern about the absence of the Foreign Secretary. Given the amount of notice for this debate and its importance to Parliament—and, indeed, to my Government, given what the Prime Minister has said about Africa—it is very sad that the Foreign Secretary finds himself unable to attend, thereby allowing the shadow Foreign Secretary to re-book his flight to Washington, having cancelled it because it seemed on Monday that the Foreign Secretary was going to be here. I hope that that does not in any way reflect on the firmness of the Government's commitment to do something quickly about Zimbabwe. It is a bad day for Parliament.

However, the fact that we are discussing Zimbabwe in the House will be a morale boost for the very many brave people I have got to know during my visits to Zimbabwe, and for Zimbabweans generally. As they endure ever-increasing hardship and oppression, we must continue to reaffirm our solidarity with them until they gain their liberation and dignity. That can come about only through absolutely free and fair elections that are internationally monitored.

I shall not go through a list of events, as the Minister has already done so, and they have been mentioned many times, but the recent news from Zimbabwe has been increasingly grim, as the regime's rather cynical policy of enforcing price cuts takes effect. As with the earlier campaigns that destroyed commercial farming, and Operation Clear Out Rubbish, this operation has been carried out with ruthless efficiency, regardless of financial or human cost, and with the sole objective of entrenching ZANU-PF rule.

I am proud to be chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Zimbabwe, many members of which are here today. During the past few years, I have felt it important to get inside Zimbabwe to see what is going on. I visited three times in the past three years, and saw Operation Clear Out Rubbish; I saw people having to abandon all their belongings as they were driven off who knows where.

John Bercow: I had a similar opportunity to visit in February 2004. I take the opportunity to invite the hon. Lady to pay generous tribute to David Banks, who once headed the Zimbabwe Democracy Trust, and who is a tireless campaigner for liberty, freedom and justice in that country. He is a magnificent person who briefs a great many of us, and we should welcome his contribution.

Kate Hoey: I am sure that David Banks is the last person who would want to be thanked, but I know that he will appreciate what the hon. Gentleman said, and all of us who have worked with him have benefited from his welcome support and knowledge of Zimbabwe.

The purpose of my last visit was to show solidarity with the trade unionists who, hon. Members will remember, were beaten up when Mugabe unleashed a brutal crackdown last autumn. I was able to travel throughout Matabeleland, north and south, Mashonaland, west and east, and the midlands. I visited rural and urban areas and met people from many backgrounds. If people just go into Harare on business for a day, they might think that things are somehow normal in Zimbabwe, although it is difficult for anything to appear normal at the moment. It is important that we understand the deep-seated fear of such an absolutely brutal dictatorship. The regime has agents and informers everywhere, willing to betray those involved in any struggle for freedom.

The arrest of senior opposition leaders in March showed the shameless brutality of the regime. Many of those who were arrested are friends and comrades with whom I have shared danger during my visits, and many of them have visited Parliament and spoken at our meetings, such as Morgan Tsvangirai, Nelson Chamesa, Sekai Holland and Grace Kwinje of the Movement for Democratic Change; Lovemore Madhuku of the National Constitutional Assembly, who has been beaten up so many times over the years; Mike Davies of the Harare Residents Association; and Lovemore Matombo and Lucia Matibenga of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions.

I pay tribute to many of the British trade unions, which are taking a much greater interest in what is happening in Zimbabwe, and have hosted visits and support for the trade union movement. The list of people I mentioned is a roll call of those targeted by Central Intelligence Organisation agents and the militia in their systematic campaign of violence against anyone who poses a threat to Mugabe's reign of terror and national destruction. We all saw the pictures of those people's bloodied and beaten faces, and the brutal injuries sustained while they were recently in custody. They were shocking images. Even as we speak, and practically every night, somewhere in Zimbabwe the police or army are taking activists out of their homes. Many of them are never returned—their bodies are found later—and many are beaten up and tortured. There has been a systematic attempt, particularly during the past six weeks, to pick on people who are crucial grass-roots opposition activists.

However, those images were not shocking enough to draw any condemnation from the leaders of African nations. Mugabe has blatantly and unapologetically beaten and murdered people in Zimbabwe, yet he is still cheered and applauded by African leaders. It happened in May when he spoke at the Nairobi summit of COMESA—the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. I find that shameful. Getting rid of South Africa's old regime was properly perceived as the business of the world, but South Africa's leaders now dismiss Zimbabwe's crisis as an internal matter to be tackled by the people of Zimbabwe.

Many people ask me, "Why don't they just rise up?" One reason for Zimbabweans' reluctance to protest on the streets and face the regime head on is that the Angolan, Mozambiquan and South African liberation movements knew that they had a safe haven in sympathetic neighbouring countries, but Zimbabwe is surrounded by countries that are either cheerleaders for Mugabe's dictatorship or choose to turn a cowardly blind eye to the atrocities that he metes out to anyone who dares challenge his rule and his vanity. Zimbabweans who stand up to Mugabe's disastrous rule should be welcomed with open arms as the front-line heroes of a new Africa. Instead, Thabo Mbeki defends the tired old men who have so miserably betrayed the dreams of their generation.

It is often said that politicians in the developed world must understand how they are perceived in Africa. However, African politicians must understand how they are seen in the rest of the world. One of our most important tasks is to help change international perception of what is happening in Zimbabwe. Mugabe is far from stupid; he is a clever operator and he has manipulated world opinion, especially in the African region. He has also played on our memories of past struggles to paralyse progressive opinion, which should express outrage at what he is doing. We have to make it clear that it is as unacceptable to defend Robert Mugabe today as it would have been to defend Pinochet or Idi Amin in the past. I make no apology for saying that, unfortunately, Mugabe has been propped up by Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and others in the region, who should be ashamed of themselves.

However, things are changing in South Africa. I was in Johannesburg earlier this year and I met representatives of COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, on the day of their central executive committee. On that day, they issued a statement, which said that the congress would not close its eyes when President Mugabe's Government trampled on workers and human rights while blaming all his country's problems on imperialists. It is a great step forward that the South African trade union movement has recognised the Mugabe regime for what it is.

We in this country could have done more, even in the recent past. I pay tribute to everybody who works in our embassy in Harare—it is not easy working in a country such as Zimbabwe—especially Andrew Pocock, our ambassador. I was disappointed by the response to our wonderful embassy's recent recommendation recently that Chingoka, the chairman of the Zimbabwean cricket board, should not be allowed to take part in the International Cricket Council at Lords because he had benefited through huge amounts of money from the corrupt operation of the cricket regime in Zimbabwe. The embassy's advice was that he should not be given a visa. To be fair to the then Foreign Office Minister, Lord Triesman, I must add that he wanted to stop Chingoka coming here. But a discussion took place, and I am afraid that the then Minister for Sport said that it would be difficult for the English cricket authorities if Chingoka was not allowed in. They ended up with the compromise that he was allowed in for the four days of the conference rather than a bit longer. There was therefore a small attempt to do something.

However, only a few weeks earlier, John Howard in Australia said what he thought. He told Australian cricketers, "You're not going to Zimbabwe." The Australian cricket board said, "Great. Fine." The International Cricket Council could not fine the board because its Government had told the cricketers that they could not go. No money went to Zimbabwe in compensation, which meant that it did not reach the pockets of the corrupt people who run cricket there. None of the money reaches Zimbabwe cricket grass roots. Time and again, we appear to shilly-shally and use the excuse of being the old imperial power, which does not wash any more.

Mr. Benyon: I have huge regard for the hon. Lady and her brave efforts on behalf of Zimbabwe. Does she agree that those who say that we should keep politics out of sport are missing the point? If a cricket team from Vauxhall or Newbury went to Zimbabwe, that would be regrettable. If a cricket team from Berkshire or Surrey went to Zimbabwe, that would be undesirable. Once a player puts three lions on his shirt and plays for the national team, however, the game inevitably becomes political, and is used by leaders in countries such as Zimbabwe as an endorsement.

Kate Hoey: I absolutely agree. Even though the Zimbabwe first team is not coming here again soon, we could send an important signal by saying that we will not go. I would also like to add my voice to those who have called for sporting sanctions against Zimbabwe. If it was good enough to impose sporting sanctions against South Africa, it is certainly good enough to impose them against Zimbabwe.

During his recent state visit to this country, President Kufuor of Ghana, the chairman of the African Union, was harassed by some young Zimbabweans at a meeting at Chatham House, but he described what is happening in Zimbabwe as "embarrassing" to the AU. He then asked what more African nations could do. The answer is not necessarily that they should start doing certain things, but that they should stop doing them. For example, he might have started by not inviting Robert Mugabe to Ghana's independence celebrations. We heard earlier about the extraordinary meeting of heads of state of the Southern African Development Community in Dar es Salaam in March to discuss the political, economic and security situation in Zimbabwe. The communiqué talked about how there had been free and fair presidential elections in 2002—an assessment that was not shared by the many international observers or by civil society in Zimbabwe. The communiqué made no mention of the parliamentary elections of 2005.

Mugabe and his African supporters have skilfully manoeuvred international opinion to get so-called engagement to be exactly what they wanted it to be. The international community was persuaded that the problem was an African crisis that needed an African solution, and handed it over to the African Union. The African Union was then relieved to hand over the hot potato to SADC, which then gave President Mbeki a feeble mandate to "facilitate dialogue". We have ended up with a protracted process that merely buys time for Mugabe to continue plundering the economy and using brutality to persecute his opponents. I believe that Zimbabwe is in flagrant breach of the declared norms and standards of SADC. SADC nations should consider perhaps suspending Zimbabwe's membership—but sadly, such a prospect is highly unlikely.

Nearly all the SADC countries are members of the Commonwealth, however. The crisis group report suggests that Commonwealth member countries in southern African should help to mediate a political settlement for a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe and set benchmarks for the country's return to the Commonwealth. Let us not forget that when Nigeria and South Africa were out of the Commonwealth, this country still treated them as though they were part of it, and tried to continue dialogue behind the scenes. The Commonwealth should be doing more. Why is it not? Will the Minister say whether Zimbabwe will be on the agenda of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kampala later this year? Indeed, have we asked it to be put on the agenda?

[Kate Hoey]

Too often, international experts are flown into Zimbabwe and hand out prescriptions without engaging with the local population. Zimbabwe is one of the most well educated and highly trained nations in Africa. The people have the necessary skills to rebuild the infrastructure of their own country. Massive international assistance will be needed, but that process must be led and implemented by Zimbabweans. There are encouraging signs that the Commonwealth will help to facilitate a partnership for reconstruction commissioned by the people of Zimbabwe and accountable to them. I hope that DFID and the FCO will do all that they can to support such initiatives.

The Government should try to re-internationalise the crisis. The time is drawing near when, if there is no sign of progress when Mbeki reports back in August, our Prime Minister should convene a summit with SADC and other Commonwealth and European Union member states, to develop a co-ordinated international strategy of incentives and disincentives that will bring about change in Zimbabwe. They should sometimes include reassigning the aid budgets for other AU nations, especially those that prop up Mugabe, to bring home to them the massive costs arising from their inaction and complicity. We cannot go on footing the bill. My constituents in the inner-city area of Vauxhall are paying for Mugabe's madness. This week, the White House would deliver a massive amount of new aid to feed 1.4 million people until the country's next harvest in 2008. Last night, it was announced in the Lords that the Department for International Development was committing £50 million more to extend the protracted relief programme.

Ironically, however, it is international aid—the food aid provided bilaterally and by UN agencies without condition or consultation since 2001—that keeps Mugabe going. It has been unquestioningly supported by the donor nations of the developed world. By "unquestioningly", I mean that the accepted wisdom of aid giving is that it is apolitical. Yet in this instance, a cunning regime has co-opted donor aid as a vital plank of its strategy of political control and oppression. I have seen for myself the way in which food was withheld from areas of the country where people had dared to vote for the Opposition.

In the Zimbabwean context everything is political, and the sooner the aid agencies recognise that, the better. We have to end the holier-than-thou attitude of the aid agencies that say that political considerations are beneath them. It is madness to commit ever larger amounts of our aid budget to dealing with symptoms without funding a cure. As we give this money, we should also give support to the trade unions and other elements of civil society that are starved of resources as they struggle to survive in Zimbabwe. How can we expect a vibrant alternative to the regime to flourish and be effective unless we give it the support that it needs? If we applied just a fraction of our humanitarian aid budget to supporting the very capable elements in Zimbabwe that offer a real alternative to the present disastrous regime, we might find that we could start to invest in the recovery of Zimbabwe, rather than simply providing sticking plasters for its bleeding wounds.

Benjamin Paradza was a commander in ZANLA during the liberation war, and he went on to become a High Court judge in Zimbabwe before he had to leave. In an e-mail earlier this week, he said:

"A humanitarian crisis is brewing in Zimbabwe of a scale never seen before. What Zimbabweans need to know is not that the British government is giving humanitarian aid. Most of it does not reach the intended beneficiaries anyway. They do not want to hear that when things change in Zimbabwe, there is a rescue plan to kick-start the economy. Yes, all that is most welcome. Zimbabwe will undoubtedly need a lot of international assistance to rebuild the economy and other institutions. What they need most at the moment, as a matter of urgency, is some positive move by the international community, possibly through the UN, to rescue the people from this crisis. Never mind the noises Mugabe makes and will always make about recolonisation, or the old artificial notions of sovereignty and imperialism. Mugabe's noises are just noises, well manufactured to draw world attention. This should not be allowed to scare the international community from the responsibility to protect (or to rescue) people under siege by tyrants like him."

That is something that the Minister should be listening to.

I shall conclude—because a lot of Members want to speak, although not from my side of the House—by saying that external commentators and donors have been very prescriptive. They are keen to tell Zimbabwean Opposition politicians what to do. They are always saying that the Movement for Democratic Change must find ways of taking back into the mainstream those who have chosen to leave. This overlooks the fact that that might not be what Zimbabweans want. Democracy is about diversity, and it seems odd that in a struggle against a one-party dictatorship, we should try to engineer a one-party Opposition. In recent weeks, the all-party parliamentary group on Zimbabwe met a delegation from the Save Zimbabwe Campaign that included leaders of three political parties, including Morgan Tsvangirai, who showed that it was possible to work together and to live with diversity. That should be welcomed as a much-needed development for African politics.

Finally, I would find it unbelievable if our Prime Minister, with all his commitment to Africa, were to allow any Minister of Her Majesty's Government to attend any conference that Mugabe was going to attend. We should be putting pressure on the Portuguese presidency so that they do not even think of asking him, let alone have discussions—about which I discovered in response to my question yesterday—to seek "a diplomatic solution". I am not interested in a diplomatic solution. I am interested in a solution that tells Mugabe right now that he will not be coming to any summit, and a solution that says to other African leaders that they will not be coming to any summit as it will not be happening if Mugabe is there. We need to get some of these African leaders to stop thinking that they can have it both ways: that they can talk to us about democracy, take our aid, expect us to stick up for them when there are problems in their country, and then turn a totally blind eye to what is going on, partly in their name, in Zimbabwe.

I want Ministers to respond to these issues. Not being a cynical person, I could not possibly be cynical enough to suspect that the reason why the Foreign Secretary did not open the debate today was that he did not actually want to face up to making a commitment on the AU-EU summit. It is much easier to leave it to a junior Minister. I am not criticising the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, who was put in a difficult position. The truth is that most hon. Members who are here today know a huge amount about Zimbabwe, which is why we are all here. Nevertheless, it is very sad

that with the House about to go on leave for so many weeks, we cannot get a straight answer. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will give a straight answer and tell us whether the Prime Minister said what he is supposed to have said, according to *The Sunday Times*—and if he did not say it, I hope that we will be told why not. An answer to that question by 6 o'clock would, I am sure, be greatly appreciated.

My first ever visit to Africa was more than 30 years ago, and it was in the presence of the current Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. He was then president of the National Union of Students and I was the vice-president, and we went to the African Commonwealth students conference in Ghana. I pay tribute to the Lord Chancellor, who, when he was Leader of the House, made sure that we secured this debate. It is rather ironic, however, that one of the reasons why he kept putting the debate off was that he wanted to have it at a time when the appropriate Minister would be here. We secured the debate today, and we all thought that that was fantastic. However, we do not even have a Minister for Africa in the House of Commons. We have some new Minister in the House of Lords whose name I have not yet learned to pronounce. I have yet to see him, and would not recognise him if he were sitting up there in the Gallery. I am amazed that as well as not having a Minister for Africa, we do not possess a Foreign Secretary who is prepared to debate Zimbabwe—even just to make the opening statement today. I must say that I am very sad about what has happened. Nevertheless, we are putting what needs to be said about Zimbabwe on the record.

I mentioned first being in Africa with the NUS, and I would like to finish by quoting one of the leaders of the Zimbabwean students union ZINASU—Washington Katema, who visited us recently. He is so brave. It is just amazing how brave some of these people are to go back to Zimbabwe after being here, not even knowing whether they will be allowed through when they arrive. They always dread having their passports taken away from them. While he was at Westminster, he said:

> "How can a government that came from the premise of liberating its people treat its own children worse than the racist...regime of Ian Smith? It is sad to note the failure of our liberation movements in transforming the standards of people's lives. While clothed in empty Pan African rhetoric, it has not brought any meaningful improvement to people's lives. Mbeki should not dupe the pro-democratic movements of Zimbabwe into abandoning the most viable route to their emancipation, that is through mass actions and street struggles."

I pay tribute to all such people in Zimbabwe, and I say to our Government that we should be leading the world on this issue. Forget the colonial tag. Get out there and make the EU and the UN take what is happening in Zimbabwe seriously.

3.44 pm

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for her eloquent contribution to the debate. I also pay tribute to the work of the all-party group on this subject. The hon. Lady expressed concerns that I share, particularly the absence of the Foreign Secretary from today's debate. A number of probing questions have already been raised and it would have been good if they had been answered directly by the Foreign Secretary. We at least secured the promise in the opening statement of another debate later in the year. We hope that the House will be given more and clearer answers at that time.

Zimbabwe shares the problems and misery of many African nations: famine, health problems such as HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, poverty, conflict, corruption, unemployment and too many guns. Other countries in the region, such as Somalia, Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia, have similar problems. By and large, however, the Governments of those countries are working with their people, neighbours and outside donors to help to provide a solution. In Zimbabwe, however, as in Sudan, the Government are part of the problem.

As was mentioned in the opening statement, leadership is a key component of the solution. There have not been enough Nelson Mandelas, and Zimbabwe has the complete opposite of an inspirational leader. We have heard today about some of the problems, which I shall try not to repeat in order to allow other Members to contribute to the debate. In Sudan, as we have heard, the problem is called genocide. Whatever people call the current situation in Zimbabwe, we want to hear what can be done about it, but we have not yet heard much about that from the Government. I hope that we will hear more in the summing-up.

On this day of two parliamentary by-elections in the UK, it is appropriate to reflect on the state of democracy and civil society elsewhere in the world. The hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) has mentioned the issue of asylum seekers. I had an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe in my constituency office some time ago. He was a political activist who had been arrested, beaten up, tortured and buried in a shallow grave. Fortunately, he and another person who were left in that shallow grave overnight managed to escape. That was the price that he paid for being an active opposition politician.

It is difficult for us to calculate the dangers faced by those who seek asylum in the UK. That asylum seeker did not want to be here—his wife and young child were in Zimbabwe and he wanted to return there. He believed, however, that were he sent back to Zimbabwe, he would be killed. He said that he would rather kill himself and have a quick end in this country than suffer a long, slow torture and eventual death in Zimbabwe. It is an outrage that we often send back asylum seekers to face who knows what.

In Zimbabwe, with the 2008 elections looming, the prospect of free and fair elections and the establishment of a real representative democracy look ever more distant and unlikely. The Liberal Democrats very much welcome the opportunity to debate Zimbabwe. Other right hon. and hon. Members have eloquently detailed the scale of the devastation affecting that country. Famine is ever more widespread, with the situation seeming to get a little worse almost every week.

It is also important, however, to remember what Zimbabwe was like prior to Robert Mugabe's destructive influence. In 1980, when Mugabe came to power, the average annual income in Zimbabwe was $950, and at that time a Zimbabwean dollar was worth more than an American dollar. By 2003, the average income was less than $400, and the Zimbabwean economy was in freefall. Robert Mugabe has ruled Zimbabwe for nearly three decades, during which he has led it from being an

[John Barrett]

impressive country with a hopeful future to probably the most dramatic peacetime collapse of any country in the world. Zimbabwe has gone from being one of the potential success stories of Africa to languishing at 151st out of 177 countries, in the United Nations Development Programme's human development index.

While Mugabe may wish to blame Zimbabwe's problems variously on the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union, the reality is that the downfall of the country rests very much on his shoulders. Zimbabwe as a country was not destined to fail; it has failed because a corrupt leadership has persecuted its own people and poisoned its politics.

In Zimbabwe today, hundreds of people continue to be arrested for participating or attempting to engage in peaceful protest. While the police have been accused of torturing human rights campaigners in custody, the independence of the judiciary has been compromised and there is little if any room for freedom of expression. Zimbabwe is under martial law in all but name.

Political party activists, trade unionists, journalists, lawyers, students, the youth movement and women activists are all targets, as the Government continue to sponsor violence, torture and brutal oppression of its own citizens. This repression was shown in graphic detail to the world on 11 March with the beating of the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai and many others. It is worth remembering that the film of that event made its way on to our screens only after being smuggled out of the country at great risk. We can only imagine the similar crimes of political oppression that go unreported and unseen.

It is worth noting, on a small and probably rare point of optimism in the debate, that the regularity of the protests against the Government since February this year seem to be on the rise, as does the willingness of protesters to stand up against police oppression. On that point, I put on record our tribute to those Zimbabweans who are trying to oppose the brutal regime in the most difficult and hostile circumstances.

While political freedoms are in decline, the utter collapse of the economy, which was mentioned earlier, and the resulting poverty are equally tragic. Others have mentioned the figures. The unemployment rate is more than 85 per cent. There is debate as to what the inflation level stands at. It is officially 4,530 per cent.; others say that it is above 1,000 per cent. Some analysts have predicted that it may reach 1 million per cent.

It was recently claimed by a former US ambassador, Chris Dell, that

"Historically, no regime has ever survived six or seven-digit inflation."

Only time will tell whether that is the case with Zimbabwe. What is certain, though, is the dire consequences of that economic devastation for the people, with more than 4 million dependent on food aid because they cannot afford to buy their own food. Many survive only on remittances from abroad. For this, we should all pay tribute to Zimbabweans in this country who are playing their part to ease the suffering in their country. I would welcome the Minister's view on what we can do to help Zimbabweans return in an orderly way if and when there is regime change in Zimbabwe and once transition is under way so that they can help rebuild their country without jeopardising their immigration status in this country.

I remember, as other hon. Members will, a time when Zimbabwe was the bread-basket of the region. Today it can no longer feed its own citizens and is using food as another political tool of repression and intimidation; the regime prioritises its supporters while denying food to those who stand up for democracy and human rights. To make matters worse, the Government continue to obstruct humanitarian aid agencies. The NGO Bill passed by the Government in 2004 may still be awaiting Mugabe's signature, but it is having a major impact on what NGOs are able to achieve. It is estimated that thousands, possibly 3,000, die from AIDS-related illnesses, yet Mugabe's regime is not willing to allow full access to the country to aid agencies that could help.

The Foreign Secretary, who will no doubt read this debate, has been commendably robust in his dealings with Russia this week. However, if ever there was a regime with which Britain needed to flex its diplomatic muscles, it is surely Zimbabwe. Tough statements in this place will get us only so far. The time is right to look afresh at what we can do. I hope that we will hear at the end of the debate today an answer to some of the questions that have been posed today. I seek fresh assurances today that the Government are doing all that they can to bring pressure to bear on President Mugabe, both by encouraging solidarity among the international community and by urging our EU partners rigorously to enforce the economic sanctions and travel bans that are in place.

I know that the previous Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister both expressed their intention to push for increased sanctions and targeted measures against Mugabe's regime. We would welcome that and would like to see a tightening of EU sanctions by considering further financial and travel restrictions. I would welcome an update from the Minister on any progress in that regard.

Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely essential to ensure that the Mugabe regime cannot be represented at the summit in Portugal? There has been no clear answer to that and we hope that we will have one by the end of the debate. It would be a betrayal of the suffering of those in Zimbabwe if we were to give a platform and an air of legitimacy to Mugabe by allowing him to attend that summit. It would also call into question the credibility of our sanctions—something we cannot afford.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the importance of other African nations accepting that the crisis in Zimbabwe is the responsibility of all Africa, not just Zimbabweans. Along with the crisis in Sudan, Zimbabwe will be a key test of African co-operation and diplomacy. South Africa and SADC are key players and exert considerable influence in Zimbabwe. The condemnation by South Africa of the beatings of Opposition leaders in Zimbabwe earlier this year was welcome, but it was the first time I can recall any public condemnation of the human rights abuses of Mugabe and his regime.

I would also like to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to persuade South Africa that refusing to acknowledge human rights abuses and political oppression is not in its best interest and is not their best approach to the problem.

On the issue of not sweeping Mugabe's crimes under the carpet, I invite the Minister today to give fresh assurances that there is no prospect of any deal whereby in order to facilitate Mugabe's political demise, he might get some sort of deal letting him off the hook for all his crimes against humanity. I am sure the Minister would agree that that would be entirely unacceptable and I invite him to underline that view today.

I said in my introduction that Mugabe was responsible for the current state of Zimbabwe. While few would dispute that, it does not mean that removing Mugabe will remove the corruption or reverse the economic disaster that he has created. Even when Mugabe goes—he will go eventually, and we will all welcome that day—and is no longer in power, we have to accept that Zimbabwe as a nation is simply not yet geared up for democracy. Other hon. Members may also have seen the comments of a former Zimbabwean trade Minister who said:

"I don't think in the last fifty years that Zimbabwe has ever known democracy."

I am afraid that Mugabe has created a political system in an image of himself and it is one that will outlast him.

The emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change around 2000 provoked much optimism in Zimbabwe and among the international community about possible political change. However, since the split and the problems of 2005, the Opposition have almost imploded and although the two factions look likely to fight the 2008 elections under one banner, it has been a hugely damaging few years for both sides. Worryingly, both sides of the MDC have shown themselves to be unable to make a clean break with the traditions of post-colonial Zimbabwe. That mindset will not be removed when Mugabe is gone. The recent alleged coup and its aftermath give us an unpleasant picture of how a post-Mugabe power-struggle might unfold.

Kate Hoey: I should remind the hon. Gentleman that political parties in this country have split and broken up at various times and democracy has continued. He is being slightly too concerned about the so-called split.

John Barrett: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. However, the problems for political parties in Zimbabwe are so huge compared with parties considering splitting or making new alliances in this country. Here, there is almost an encouragement to shift political concentration. In Zimbabwe, the Opposition have enough problems anyway without internal splits. I wish them well in being an effective Opposition.

Getting rid of Mugabe would be a start, but that is all. We may have to brace ourselves for the prospect of the situation getting worse before it gets better. On that point I would welcome the Minister's comments on the crucial issue of what aid we can provide in the event of Mugabe's downfall or a change in regime. It is important to ensure that we are able to respond rapidly and effectively to help the people of Zimbabwe. I would especially like to know what mechanisms for transition and reconstruction are in place and what guarantees on transition to a free and democratic Zimbabwe the Government and other donors would require.

Zimbabwe is not at war, but it bears all the hallmarks of a conflict country. If there were a power transition in Zimbabwe, may I ask the Minister whether it would be possible to treat it as a post-conflict state in order to gather maximum support for a programme of sequenced humanitarian aid, stabilisation and reconstruction?

4 pm

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): First, I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for doing so much to keep the issue of Zimbabwe on the agenda in this place and elsewhere, and for the courageous manner in which she has pursued her cause. I also wish to say that I have some sympathy for the Minister, as she is only the latest in a series of hapless Foreign Office Ministers—I was myself one—who have been put up to deal with debates and answer questions on Africa even though they might never have set foot on that continent. That is because for the past two years and more the Africa Minister has sat in the House of Lords.

I yield to no one in my respect for Lord Triesman, who succeeded me in that post; he is held in great esteem in the other place and was a most effective Africa Minister. However, it is a bit of a problem—I do not put it more strongly than that—that there is no Foreign Office Minister in the Commons who deals on a daily basis with African issues and can answer questions.

The rapid turnover is also a bit of a problem. I should declare an interest: I was this Government's sixth Africa Minister, Lord Triesman was the seventh and Lord Malloch-Brown is the eighth. I remember an occasion when an African leader said to me that he had visited the United Kingdom four times but he had never met the same Africa Minister twice. That creates a problem for our relations with Africa. We say that we care about Africa, and we do—we take Africa seriously from the Prime Minister down—but the high turnover of Africa Ministers means that no one has a consistent grip on African issues.

I spent two happy years as Africa Minister at the Foreign Office even though there were many enormous African issues to deal with—many of them bigger than Zimbabwe in terms of scale of catastrophe and human suffering, such as events in the Congo region, Angola, Sudan and Liberia. However, Zimbabwe occupied more of my time than any other issue—and I, like the Minister, had to come to the Dispatch Box to be lambasted by the Opposition for not doing enough, even though we were doing everything in our power to keep Zimbabwe on the international agenda.

I am ambivalent about House of Commons debates on Zimbabwe. We have had a lot—although I acknowledge that not all have been held in the Chamber—and despite the fact that we all agree that Mugabe's rule has been catastrophic and that he has inflicted ruin on his people and that he should leave office as soon as possible, such debates to some extent play into his hands. Whether we like it or not, he has succeeded in convincing many Africans leaders and Africans that this is a bilateral dispute between himself and the former colonial power—although I am glad that that argument is now becoming threadbare.

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

There is another problem with such debates. I mean no disrespect to any Member present, but usually only the usual suspects take part—I see that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), a veteran of many such debates, is smiling. In those debates Members propose prescriptions that frequently stop just short of a British invasion—although I have not heard such calls this afternoon. While that may enable us to go home feeling good about ourselves, it has not changed anything at all in Zimbabwe and has potentially done some damage in giving Mugabe yet another little stick with which to beat us. The painful truth is that our influence is limited. Yes, we can add or subtract a name from the EU travel ban or regret that Mugabe has been invited to the Lisbon summit. He should not have been, and I am confident that we did our best to stop him being invited—

Meg Munn: The invitations have not been issued yet.

Mr. Mullin: In that case, I hope that Mugabe will not be invited, but I dare to contemplate the possibility that he will be. In any case, I know that we will strongly resist. Then there is the issue of whether the Prime Minister should go, or the Foreign Secretary or a junior Minister. The problem is that it is a summit about Africa and there are other equally important issues that require the attention of Ministers. We can also argue about whether our cricket team should be banned from touring, but the painful truth is that short of putting the hon. Member for Macclesfield in a gunboat and sending him up the Zambezi, there are no original solutions left that we could impose on that tragic situation.

The bottom line is that, as has been said this afternoon, this is ultimately an African problem and it requires an African solution. I share the general disappointment at the silence of African leaders—with a handful of honourable exceptions—of the AU and of SADC. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall pointed out, some of those have acted as cheerleaders. They have not merely been silent, but have acted disgracefully. I have had many conversations with African Heads of State and Government about Zimbabwe. Many of them have been very critical of Mugabe in private, but that has not translated in what they have said to the outside world. I remember meeting one Head of State immediately before he was due to go into a session at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Nigeria in 2004 and he was very robust in what he said about Mugabe. He was from a more or less neighbouring country and I suggested he make those points when he got into the meeting. He said that he would, but when I asked the then Prime Minister afterwards whether so-and-so had had anything to say on the issue, he said, "Not a peep." Unfortunately, that has happened fairly often.

The Foreign Minister of a west African country once described the problem to me as the great liberator syndrome. He said that Africa was full of great liberators who have gone on to ruin their countries. I shall not name his country, but he added, "And we should know"—as indeed he should.

As I have said, I was present at the Abuja CHOGM in 2004 and I am sorry to say that President Mbeki did not act as some sort of neutral mediator on the issue of whether Zimbabwe should be readmitted—it would have brought humiliation on us had that happened—but as an agent of Mugabe, and the issue dominated that summit to the exclusion of many other important issues. Even at this late stage, however, I hope that South Africa can be persuaded to intervene decisively to bring this catastrophe to an end. It is deeply in its interests to do so, as it has the best part of 2 million refugees from Zimbabwe and that must be having a serious impact on its economy. The South Africans are well aware of the problem and, as my hon. Friend said, some of them are beginning to speak out.

My hon. Friend also pointed out that African leaders cannot have things both ways. They cannot make wonderful speeches at the AU about their love of democracy and so forth, then go home and rig their constitutions so that they get third or fourth terms in office and still expect the assistance of the outside world. Neither can they expect to invite the outside world to get involved in a cause such as South Africa's anti-apartheid movement—and they were very happy to have the outside world's interest in that—and then say that the things that are happening now on their own doorsteps are no one else's business. That is completely unacceptable.

I look forward to the day when more African leaders come from the new generation. Rightly or wrongly, many people regard Mugabe as a hero of the liberation struggle, but not many more of his ilk are left. He is the last of that generation, so we will probably not face the same problem again.

Whatever happens in Zimbabwe, the end is in sight. We can demand that the British Government do this or that, but the truth is that the person inflicting the most damage on the country and its regime is Mugabe himself. He is bringing it down, and it will fall around his ears unless a compromise is found that allows him to be evacuated into a safe retirement. His regime cannot survive the present levels of inflation, and little that we do or do not do will make any difference.

The end is close, so we need to spend a little time talking about what comes next, because that will not be easy. When the time comes to try to stabilise Zimbabwe, we will have to work with some of the people who are mixed up with the present regime. That may be distasteful, but it is a fact of life and we have to think about it. I do not know whether or not Mr. Gono should be added to the travel ban, but in the end we will have to work with someone who knows about economics in Zimbabwe. I am not asserting that it will be him, merely raising it as a possibility that we should not exclude.

When the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), sums up the debate, I hope that he will say something about how he imagines that the international community will be able to help when the regime falls. We are within sight of that and, although I appreciate that he will not be able to go into much detail, we need some assurance that plans are being laid and that we are talking with our EU and African partners, and with other international contacts, about what exactly will happen when the end comes. Obviously, we cannot be too prescriptive, as we do not know how the end will occur. We pray that the transition will be peaceful, with no more bloodshed or catastrophe, but we cannot rule such things out.

The most we can say to the Zimbabweans is, "We are with you. We support you. We want your beautiful country to be put back together again, and we stand ready to help. You have not been forgotten." However, I hope that we do not get involved in too much posturing about who said what to whom, and who should or should not be banned. In the end, all that is fairly irrelevant to the big picture.

We should welcome the fact that the end is coming. On many occasions, hon. Members of all parties, in the Government and on the Back Benches, have made their views clear. We must be ready to help when the time comes.

4.13 pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Con): We have heard some powerful speeches today, but I am sad to say that I must begin by questioning whether the Government were entirely wise in letting this debate go ahead. The whole point of holding a debate like this in the House of Commons should have been to send a powerful message to Zimbabwe, Mugabe, the AU and others about the British Government's determination in this matter. For whatever reason, however, the Foreign Secretary was unable to take part, and that has served to reduce the debate's value.

In addition, the Minister's opening speech contained nothing new—I do not blame her for that—but what she was unable to say had the effect of putting us back a little. Far from being able to confirm the clear indication given to the press that the Prime Minister would not attend any summit attended by Mugabe, she refused to be drawn on the matter. There might be reasons for that, but given that there will probably be another debate on Zimbabwe later in the year, I have to question whether today's debate has been in the interests of that country's people.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend recall that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), in his statement on Zimbabwe on 26 March, confirmed that the French had banned Mr. Mugabe from going to the French-African summit last February, and does he not think that the British Government, by declaring today that they will not attend the AU-EU summit, could do exactly the same thing as the French?

Sir Malcolm Rifkind: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. There is a process not just of putting pressure on Mugabe, but of applying pressure within the European Union. Clear messages of that kind from the United Kingdom at this stage need to be given not just privately, but publicly if they are to have the full weight that we would wish.

The whole issue of Zimbabwe, and, formerly, of Southern Rhodesia, has dominated debates in the House for many years. I could not help but recollect that my maiden speech in this Chamber, 33 years ago, was on what was then Southern Rhodesia. I can trump the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), because my first visit to Southern Rhodesia was in 1967. I lived and worked in what was then Salisbury and is now Harare for almost two years. I taught at the then university college of Rhodesia and got to know the country very well indeed.

I have various recollections of that period. Even at that time, in the 1960s, the university was a multiracial university of black and white students. When I left the university, I lost touch with most of them. However, in 1979, when I first became a member of the Government, I received totally out of the blue a letter from one of my former black students, who wrote on headed notepaper from Harare: "Dear Mr. Rifkind, I am writing to congratulate you on your appointment as a junior Minister in the British Government. As you can see from the notepaper, I am now Foreign Minister." That was an interesting indicator of the unpredictability of public life.

It is worth remembering that, at the time of the Lancaster House conference, there was great optimism—justifiably so—about the future prospects of what was becoming Zimbabwe. First, the transition from the Smith regime to an elected Government happened peacefully thanks to the consequences of the Lancaster House conference. Secondly, and equally importantly, the vast majority of the white minority had agreed to continue living in the country. They were prepared to accept that there was a prospect of a future for both black and white. We were seeing the emergence of a black middle class and the Zimbabwean economy began in a very strong way.

I would go one stage further: part of the reason why we were optimistic was the attitude of Robert Mugabe at that time and for several years thereafter—with the terrible exception of what happened in Matabeleland. Right at the beginning, Mugabe accepted the advice he got from Samora Machel, who said, "Do not make the mistake we made in Mozambique when we thought we could do without the Portuguese and our economy collapsed." Mugabe accepted that advice and gave assurances to the white community. To a considerable extent, for the first few years he honoured those assurances, which provided a period of stability in the country.

In addition, although Mugabe went through the rhetoric of "Comrade This" and "Comrade That" and meetings of the politburo in Harare, the economic policy that was pursued was not significantly different from the policy of his predecessors, which also enhanced the stability of the country. Furthermore, I pay credit to the fact that he allowed Ian Smith—who had locked Mugabe up for many years in Rhodesian prisons—not only to remain at liberty but to sit in the Parliament of Zimbabwe, albeit obviously without any real power.

In those early years, there was some practical reason to believe that, whatever Mugabe's background and innermost ideological thoughts, he had realised what the interests of his country needed at that time. So why did things change in such a fundamental way? It was essentially because the policies being pursued, although moderate, were increasingly unpopular within Zimbabwe and Mugabe realised that, far from being able to assume that elections would give him power for the rest of his life, free elections would drive him out of power. We all know what the consequences of that have been. As a number of hon. Members have said, instead of Zimbabwe being the bread-basket of Africa, it has become the basket-case of Africa, in a very depressing and miserable fashion.

What flows from that? There have been two external tragedies that have added to the woes of Zimbabwe.

[Sir Malcolm Rifkind]

The first is the attitude of the African Union. It is a matter of considerable sadness that the African Union, which was created in order not to continue with the foolish attitudes and priorities of the old Organisation of African Unity, has copied some of its worst mistakes. We see that most vividly in the case of its attitude towards Zimbabwe.

The assumption that criticism of Mugabe's record on human rights is evidence of a colonial mentality is increasingly absurd, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall rightly emphasised. The United Kingdom has been equally determined to ensure that it condemns and brings to the forefront of public attention human rights abuses in any country in the world, including those with which we have no colonial links. Indeed, I recall dealing with the banning of Solidarity in Poland when I was in the Foreign Office. When I insisted on meeting members of Solidarity at the British embassy in Warsaw, General Jaruzelski publicly accused me and the British Government of treating Poland as if it was a former British colony, thus implying that this is something that all British Governments inevitably find themselves doing. The African Union needs to reconsider how it can best serve the interests of its continent and people.

The other deep disappointment is South Africa. I am wrong to say that; it is President Thabo Mbeki. People such as Nelson Mandela have been unequivocal in their condemnation of Mugabe. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said, "We in South Africa should be ashamed of ourselves because we are not bringing more pressure on Mugabe." Mbeki should reflect on the fact if he looks at the history of his country and region that it was only when P. W. Botha, his white predecessor, decided to withdraw support from Ian Smith that the Government of Southern Rhodesia were forced to accept that the whole unilateral declaration of independence experiment had totally failed. That was when steps began, first involving Muzorewa and then leading to Lancaster House. South Africa is not just a neighbour of Zimbabwe. As we know from historical experience, it is the one country that can have an impact on what any Government of Zimbabwe can contemplate at any time that is not only profound, but decisive. If Thabo Mbeki declines to use such authority and power, he has personal responsibility for the continuing suffering of Zimbabwe and the implications of that for his country, because 2 million or 3 million Zimbabwean refugees are living in South Africa, which inevitably has a damaging impact on that country's economy.

Where do we go from here? What are the prospects for the United Kingdom or other countries being able to bring some pressure? Let me turn to the African Union-European Union summit. It is not unreasonable to point out that it is seven years since there has been an AU-EU summit, which is a long time. Such a summit would be desirable, but we have waited seven years, so no one should be too alarmed if we have to wait a few more, if the alternative is to destroy all credibility in the policy that the EU has adopted to try to deal with the problem of Mugabe and Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Africa has more to lose than Europe if European-African co-operation is not enhanced. It will benefit most if a summit takes place and that leads to improvements in the economic and trading relationships between Europe and Africa.

Everything now centres on the question of whether Mugabe will be invited to attend the summit. Some rather disturbing remarks have been made. Mr. Sócrates, the Prime Minister of Portugal, has said:

"Appropriate diplomatic formulae will be found",

thus suggesting that there is a method of inviting Mr. Mugabe not as the President of Zimbabwe, but as a simple participant in an intergovernmental conference, as if that would somehow resolve the difficulty. On 3 July, *The Daily Telegraph* reported an unnamed British official as saying of Mugabe:

"The issue of whether he is there or not should not detract from the substance or overshadow the summit".

If those words are taken literally, they are very disturbing. That British official could not have got it more wrong. There can be no doubt that whether Mugabe is there or not will totally dominate the summit and preclude any progress on other issues.

If Mugabe is to attend, it is not a question of his simply being issued with an invitation. The EU has a ban on Mr. Mugabe visiting EU countries. I have with me a copy of the *Official Journal of the European Union*. The rules permit exceptions to be made, but they clearly say that any member state can object if a country—presumably Portugal in this case—wishes to get an exemption to allow Mr. Mugabe to visit Lisbon. If an objection is made, a vote under qualified majority voting is required for an exemption to be made.

The very least that we ask—we expect the Minister to respond to this point later today—is an assurance that if it is proposed that we depart from the rules banning Mugabe from visiting an EU country, the UK will object, and will require a vote to take place. My view, and I suspect the view of hon. Members on both sides of the House, is that even if a majority voted to invite him, through some mistaken judgment, the British Government should have already made it clear that if Mugabe is in Lisbon, the British Government will not be there—and I do not just mean the Prime Minister; there would be little impact if he was absent but the Foreign Secretary was there.

The United Kingdom should make it abundantly clear that the UK will not take part in an EU-AU summit if Mr. Mugabe is present in Lisbon, but that has to be made clear well in advance, so that other member states know the kind of stakes for which we are playing. It is important to play for very high stakes, because the sadness is that if the African Union will not champion the interests of the people of Zimbabwe, and if the European Union starts deserting the interests of the people of Zimbabwe, who is left? Who would speak out for their requirements if that depressing situation arose?

I will not speak for much longer, because I want to allow hon. Friends and other hon. Members to speak, but I make one final point: the past 30 or 40 years have been a difficult period in the history of Africa, partly for reasons beyond the control of many African states. Most states across the world came about when a nation was already in existence. The Italian nation existed, and it created an Italian state. The German nation existed before there was a German state. In Africa, because of the colonial experience, it happened the other way round: states were created in the 1960s, but for the most part they had artificial borders, and there was no sense

of national identity. That has made it very difficult for many African countries to realise their aspirations, and that is one of the reasons why Africa has so many failed states, even compared with other parts of the world.

Even taking that background into account, the sad and terrible fact is that Zimbabwe was one of the countries least exposed to such concerns, because it had a degree of homogeneity. The Ndebele and Shona populations were mostly to be found within the borders of the old Southern Rhodesia, and the creation of the state of Zimbabwe followed a greater natural logic than many other African countries, as it was between the Limpopo and the Zambezi. In addition, unlike most of sub-Saharan Africa, because of the Southern Rhodesian period, Zimbabwe inherited an impressive infrastructure, including a working civil service, experience of the rule of law, a free press, and various other instruments of government. It should have seen that as a great benefit and advantage. That has been squandered; that is the tragedy of the people of Zimbabwe, and the personal responsibility of Robert Mugabe.

The British Government's responsibility is more important than perhaps it ought to be. The African Union is declining to exercise its responsibility, the South African President will not, I fear, change his view, and other countries around the world do not have our knowledge or experience of the reality of Zimbabwe. If the British Government are to carry the influence and the impact that they ought to, there must be greater clarity of policy. There must be a willingness to exercise diplomacy, and not just privately, in the corridors of the EU. There must be public exposition of the policy, because in the current rather difficult situation, every available weapon must be at our disposal and fully used. The development of public opinion is a weapon that can be used only if we are prepared to be robust, not only privately but publicly, and we could do a lot worse than to start on that course about an hour and a half from now.

4.29 pm

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am pleased to follow my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind). He clearly has considerable experience of what is now Zimbabwe and what was, when he first went there, Southern Rhodesia. Although I cannot go back quite as far as he does, I was there a number of times during the early and middle 1970s. I was also paying a visit to what was then Zimbabwe Rhodesia in 1979, as the interim Government of that country under Bishop Abel Muzorewa, Chief Chirau and others flew off to London to the Lancaster House talks.

One conversation sticks firmly in my mind. The then President of Zimbabwe Rhodesia was a Matabele, President Gumede. In the grounds of Government house, over a wonderful cup of tea, he turned to me very solemnly and said, "Mr. Winterton, I am sad. If only the free civilised western world would allow our country to solve our problems our way, we would produce the right result." He continued, "As it is, my Government has left Salisbury", as it was then, "as the Government, but it will come back from Lancaster House as nothing." I thought that that was significant. He went on to say, "That will give a very clear message to the people of our country that the Government that was the Government is not the Government or the party for which they should vote."

We know the result. What my right hon. and learned Friend said about the first few years of Robert Mugabe's Government was correct. Yes, it was stable. There were 20 reserved seats for the whites in the Zimbabwe Parliament. Yes, he sought to maintain stability and perhaps even to practise what Archbishop Tutu recommended—reconciliation. We all felt that perhaps there would be success and prosperity for that wonderful country. What happened has been brushed over. I intervened from a sedentary position on the Minister when she said that the first 10 years were all brightness, prosperity and goodness. She overlooked the slaughter of 20,000 Matabele by the Korean-trained 5th brigade of Mr. Mugabe's army. That should not be underestimated or forgotten. It was genocide. Perhaps it indicated what Mr. Mugabe might ultimately do, and we know what he has done.

The contribution of my right hon. and learned Friend to the debate was extremely helpful. He sketched the macro-historical background, as did the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), who made a philosophical and very helpful speech, in which he said that the problems of Zimbabwe can be solved only in Africa by African nations. He is absolutely right. My right hon. and learned Friend stressed the role that Thabo Mbeki and the Government of South Africa can play. President Mbeki can switch on and switch off the future of Mr. Mugabe and his Administration in Zimbabwe.

I pay tribute to the statesmanship of the first democratically elected President of the Republic of South Africa, Nelson Mandela. He has made his views clear not only publicly, but as I know from conversations, privately to Mr. Robert Mugabe. If only Nelson Mandela were still in charge as President of the Republic of South Africa, that country might be playing an even more positive, helpful rule in seeking to bring about change in Zimbabwe.

Change must be brought about, because the problems facing Zimbabwe are absolutely desperate. In the three years that have passed since our last full debate on that country, the situation has deteriorated dramatically. As the Minister and other hon. Members know, I have personally pressed the Government for a debate on the tragedy in Zimbabwe for more than a year. It is now clear to all those who know anything about the country that unless external influences force Robert Mugabe to back down and accept change, he will end up destroying what is left of his country—which is not saying very much. Agriculture is operating at 20 per cent. capacity, and tourism, hotels and hospitality at about the same rate. Industry is operating at 50 per cent. capacity. Mining is still operating at about 80 per cent. capacity, but, sadly, is beginning to decline rapidly. Zimbabwe's currency and stock market are absolutely worthless.

The appalling humanitarian, political and economic situation in Zimbabwe continues to deteriorate. With Operation Murambatsvina leaving 700,000 people destitute, more than 4 million people at risk of starvation and surviving on food aid, and political repression continuing apace, not least because of the farm clearances that have devastated food production from its once rich lands, we all know that the situation is desperate. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) said, the operations

[Sir Nicholas Winterton]

relating to clearance and repression were carried out with ruthless efficiency regardless of financial or human consideration, and they have been stunningly successful. The Mugabe regime got away with both operations: in the case of the white farmers and their employees and staff, because they were easy targets; and in the case of the clearance of informal housing in Harare because, sadly, the United Nations system has no teeth or courage, and the question might have been posed, "Who cares about urban slum dwellers anyway?"

Political repression in Zimbabwe is rife, and there are reports that it is still on the rise. Amnesty International says that the security forces are increasing their attacks on human rights groups and student opposition leaders. The Harare Government have proposed the Interception of Communications Bill, which will allow the military, intelligence services, police and the office of the President to monitor e-mail correspondence, internet access and even telephone conversations. The departing United States ambassador to Zimbabwe, Christopher Dell, who has already been quoted two or three times, left no one in any doubt about the fragility of the situation. He said that the "economic madness" made it impossible for Mugabe to remain in power for very much longer. That was, to some extent, the message of the hon. Member for Sunderland, South.

The other threat to Mr. Mugabe would be a palace coup to replace him as ZANU-PF's leader and Zimbabwe's President. The Senate elections of 26 November 2005 were a cynical act of political patronage designed to consolidate ZANU-PF's authoritarian grip on Zimbabwe. Regrettably, the main Opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, split into two factions in October 2005. However, I am not sure that that is necessarily important. I believe that come next year's elections, the Opposition parties may well come together to oppose Mr. Mugabe. That was certainly suggested to me by the meetings with representatives of political parties, churches, youth and students that the hon. Member for Vauxhall and I attended.

The development of Africa as a priority for western democracies has grown radically in recent years, not least because of the efforts of our Prime Minister. However, western democracies must recognise that aid alone can achieve little and that African Governments are expected to deliver their side of the bargain through a commitment to democracy, good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The reality, however, is that Zimbabweans suffer from an unemployment rate of more than 70 per cent. Some people say that it is even higher—it could be 80 per cent. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) talked about the inflation rate, which is estimated to be anything between 1,500 per cent. and 4,000 per cent. Some people say that it is even higher than that.

Mr. Mugabe has said that his Government would ruthlessly take over companies that ignore their call to reduce prices. That has been made worse by the police, who use those new opportunities, in their regulatory and checking role, to indulge in mass looting. Mr. Mugabe said:

> "We would take over all companies which continue to increase prices. If they want to be rough, we will show them that we are even rougher".

The Zimbabwean Government have drafted soldiers and police to help enforce a ban on price increases, which they say are unjustified and meant to incite popular revolt against Mr Mugabe and ZANU-PF. Would hon. Members believe that the Government would go to the lengths of setting up hotlines, encouraging people to report cases of alleged overpricing or hoarding of some basic goods? As a result, many important products have disappeared from shop shelves. In the past few days and weeks, we have seen more evidence that the ZANU-PF regime does not have a clue about how to manage the country and its economy. Having destroyed much of the productive sector, it is now embarking on a headlong rush to take over what is left and completely destroy whatever reputation Zimbabwe had as a destination for investment in any shape or form.

After months of speculation about their taking over of 51 per cent. of all mining companies, the Government have announced that they will take over 51 per cent. of all public companies, and any others that they think are attractive targets. That 51 per cent. figure means that control of management and all corporate policies are taken over by the Government, so that foreign and local investors who hold stocks in such companies will have no say over who manages them or what they do with their money.

It signifies the tragedy of that country and the problems facing its good people that prices went up 100 per cent. in April, and 200 per cent. in May. In June, they started doubling every week; this month, they will accelerate even further. Already, firms are closing their doors while they work out what to charge, and some are simply planning to close until the current situation is over. The US ambassador said last week that he would not be surprised if Zimbabwe hit 1.5 million per cent. inflation by the end of the year. Inflation is a symptom of a disease called bad macro-economic policy and such policies are exclusively in the hands of the state. The Reserve Bank and the Ministry of Finance are driving inflation in Zimbabwe. One cannot run a budget deficit of 60 per cent. of GDP and not expect the currency to collapse.

It is a matter of huge concern that the African Union, which has been sensibly referred to in the debate, the Southern African Development Community, and South Africa in particular, have failed to take a strong enough stand against the reprehensible Mugabe regime. I am concerned by reports from human rights organisations that migrants from Zimbabwe are vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse in the Republic of South Africa. Furthermore, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea said, more emigration of Zimbabweans to South Africa could cause considerable difficulties in that country. Perhaps it might even put the football World cup in that country in jeopardy.

I am sure that the Under-Secretary has considered early-day motion 1870, which I supported and which has been mentioned many times in the debate. It expresses deep concern that plans are under way to invite the Zimbabwean Government to the EU-Africa summit in Lisbon. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), who will reply to the debate, listens to the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and

Chelsea about the EU regulation and decision. If Portugal means to invite Zimbabwe to attend the conference, it must get permission and exemption from the regulation. I hope that it does not because I believe that Mr. Mugabe's presence—or even that of other leading representatives of Zimbabwe—at the summit will have a damaging effect.

Robert Mugabe, who appeared to start so well and was described as a freedom fighter and a liberator of his country, now systematically denies Zimbabweans rights and destroys their livelihoods, without the slightest regard for democratic principles and fundamental human rights. The argument that all African countries need to be invited to the summit in Lisbon to ensure its success is fallacious.

The UK Government must condemn, in the strongest terms, the Mugabe dictatorship for its relentless oppression of the Zimbabwean people and express their profound disappointment at the refusal of the important regional actors, such as the African Union, the South African Development Community and Southern Africa, to take a more robust stance against the Harare regime's abuses, and at their failure to insist that the Zimbabwean Government should mend their ways and restore democracy and the rule of law. In my view, the international community has not exercised as much pressure and influence as it should. Consequently, Mr. Mugabe has been able to get away with the great suffering that he has brought to his people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) is sitting in front of me, and he has taken a particular interest in the next subject that I want to mention. Mr. Mugabe's Government's abusive practices, such as eviction and the clearance of informal housing, which has disrupted access to health care, undermine Zimbabwe's progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Inadequate social welfare policies have further heightened the vulnerability of AIDS patients. It is a matter of huge concern that, as my hon. Friend knows, Zimbabwe is currently experiencing one of the world's worst HIV/AIDS epidemics, with more than 3,200 people a week dying from the disease.

Will the Government call on the Zimbabwean Government to take urgent action to improve access to antiretroviral treatment, which—I regret to say—only some 8 per cent. of those infected with the disease receive? The current water and power shortages have crippled the delivery of health services in most hospitals and clinics throughout the country. They cannot operate without clean water and power.

The EU rightly refuses to recognise the legitimacy of the recently created Senate in Zimbabwe because a mere 15 per cent. of Zimbabweans participated in that discredited election process, the result of which was, of course, guaranteed beforehand to favour ZANU-PF. The EU has also called on Robert Mugabe to comply with his promise to stand down.

John Bercow: In addition to the escalating AIDS epidemic, millions of women face problems in gaining access to sanitary products. Is my hon. Friend aware that one pack of such products costs 50 per cent. of a woman's salary? There are desperate shortages. Imports are required, and should we not pay tribute to the Dignity! Period campaign, which is desperately trying to get help to the women who so obviously need it?

Sir Nicholas Winterton: As ever, my hon. Friend draws a critical statistic to the House's attention. I pay tribute to that organisation, but the case he describes is inevitable given the prevailing circumstances in Zimbabwe.

The EU has called on Robert Mugabe to comply with his promise to stand down, sooner rather than later—that would be the largest single step towards reviving Zimbabwe's society, politics and the economy—and to commence positive transitional negotiations between ZANU-PF, the MDC parties and other opposition movements. I hope that we shall seek to bring all parties together in every way possible. We do not want to encourage civil war or internal conflict; we want to bring all the parties together. I am aware from my contacts in the country that a number of members of ZANU-PF know that Mr. Mugabe's days are numbered and would like to get together with the other political parties and ensure a peaceful change.

Regrettably, the EU's targeted sanctions against Zimbabwe and certain individuals in the country have failed to have the desired impact on those directly responsible for Zimbabwe's impoverishment and the hardships endured by its people. The Government should call on the European Council to ensure that all member states rigorously apply the existing restrictive measures, including the travel ban, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea highlighted, and the arms embargo. They should err on the side of exclusion rather than weak-willed permissiveness.

The Government should call on the Council to expand the scope of sanctions and further enlarge the list of individuals, which I understand currently stands at 120, so that it encompasses many more Zimbabwean Ministers, deputies and governors, executives, including the governor of the Reserve Bank, ZANU-PF members, supporters and workers and their family members, as well as business men and other prominent individuals associated with the party.

The international community has a duty to call on China, in particular, and other countries that continue to supply weaponry and other support to the Mugabe regime to desist and join the international community in its efforts to bring about change for the betterment of the people of Zimbabwe. I can only deplore the fact that at the same time as the United Nations is appealing for $257 million in humanitarian aid for Zimbabwe, Mr. Robert Mugabe and his Government are completing the procurement of 12 K-8 military aircraft from China, at a cost of $240 million. The Zimbabwean army has announced the purchase of 127 vehicles for senior officers, with another 194 to be purchased over the coming months. The Zimbabwean Government can buy weaponry, vehicles and aircraft, but they cannot provide food, power and electricity for their people.

I have visited Zimbabwe many times. They are a lovely and wonderful people, be they Mashona or Matabele. I believe that they deserve better from the civilised world than they are getting.

I shall try to speak in the next debate on Zimbabwe, which the Minister promised would take place in the autumn, but my final words in this debate will be to ask whether all parties in this place, and all civilised countries, could work together to produce an exit

[Sir Nicholas Winterton]

package for Mr. Robert Mugabe, so that we can save the people of that country from further suffering. Yes, a lot of people would like to see him hanging from the nearest lamp post, but I am not interested in that. I am interested in getting him away from Zimbabwe so that we can restore stability, progress and a sound economy, and bring an end to the suffering of the wonderful people of that country.

4.55 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend, East) (Con): One always hesitates before rising to follow an excellent speech by a senior colleague such as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton). I hope that he will not mind my pointing out that when he was first experiencing what was then Rhodesia, I was still in short trousers. I hope, too, that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) will not take umbrage if I point out that when he was teaching there, I was not even born. I also hope that if I serve the House for anything like as long as they have done, young Members of Parliament coming into the House will have a little more respect for their elders.

As much as a 35-year-old with two years' experience of the House can be said to have a long-standing interest in a subject, I do have such an interest in Zimbabwe. I went there in my early 20s as part of my work for the British bank, Barclays, in a number of southern African countries. That interest has been renewed by my representing Rochford and Southend, East, which has a Zimbabwean community of more than 250, as it was an asylum distribution centre. I am sure that hon. Members will not mind if I commend to them the work of Washington Ali, who represents the Zimbabwean community here and provides me with a constant feed of information on the country, on which I will draw heavily in this speech. I shall also draw heavily on the work of the all-party group on Zimbabwe, which is so ably chaired by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). Its meetings are truly invaluable.

Unlike some Members, I am optimistic about Zimbabwe. I find Zimbabweans to be among the most optimistic, entrepreneurial, go-getting individuals in the region, or even the world. There is a bright future for Zimbabwe; it is a post-Mugabe future. I have not visited Harare for more than 10 years, but I look forward to receiving an invite from a democratically elected Government of Zimbabwe in the near future.

In order for Zimbabwe to have a new democratic Government, however, Mugabe has to go. I would love to see him hanging from a lamppost, but that is not the way in which we want to move forward. I want to see him brought to justice for what he has done in Matabeleland and in his entire country. That is not necessarily the most important issue, however. Washington Ali and other Zimbabweans tell me that they want justice, but not at the price of one more day of a failed state. If providing Mugabe with a soft landing results in peace, democracy, stability and a strong economic foundation for Zimbabwe being achieved earlier, we must go for that.

Barclays bank, for which I worked, is still in Zimbabwe. It has been there since 1912 and employs more than 1,000 people. I congratulate it and the many South African companies that are sticking with their local communities, local shareholders and local employees in these hard times. Those companies will be instrumental in bringing forward the changes that will be needed for the new Zimbabwe.

Politics is only part of the solution. As politicians, we tend to focus on it a bit more than we focus on the economics. As an ex-banker, however, I would like to focus a bit more on the economics. We have heard about the inflation in Zimbabwe. Speaking to business men there, I understand that the rate is about 8,000 per cent. It is impossible to understand such figures. Washington Ali tells a story of someone who filled up their car with fuel, and two and a half weeks later, having managed to find another filling station that still had fuel, found that it now cost three times as much.

Operation Slash Prices is further damaging the economy. I have with me an e-mail from a business man in Bulawayo, who had

"just come back from witnessing an operation by the so-called Task Force at Makro"—

a large South African company that operates throughout southern Africa. The e-mail continues:

"The Task Force arrived mid morning and on a totally arbitrary basis, it ordered them to halve the prices of TVs, Fridges, Deep Freezers"

and a number of other products, including a "30 tonne load" of soap. It was a bizarre scene. Effectively, these shops were being looted. They were forced to sell goods on a preferential basis to supporters of ZANU-PF, who would be allowed in to buy those goods. Those shops are not going to restock. Speaking to employees, this business man said that there was concern that many jobs had effectively disappeared. Those are not the actions of a rational man, and they are not actions that will help save Zimbabwe.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) is no longer in his place. I had a conversation with him a few days ago in which he made some of the same points. He feared that we were rehearsing the same arguments time and again. However, I believe that things are changing on a daily basis. Even in last weekend's press, there was some positive news about new thinking and new ideas coming out of southern Africa.

The idea of bringing Zimbabwe into the rand common monetary area is particularly important. It has already worked in Swaziland with the emalangeni, in Namibia with the dollar, in Lesotho with the loti—and it has even worked in Botswana, where although there is not an exact pegging to that economy, there is an unofficial relationship between the two and a rate of approximately 70 per cent. Bringing Zimbabwe into that zone will enforce a much greater degree of macro-economic stability. In reality, most people do not use Zim dollars; they use US dollars, South African rand, and to a lesser degree, pounds sterling. If Mugabe goes and there is regime change, that is something very immediate that can happen. However, it will not be a matter of SADC support alone. It will take international support and international money to achieve. The Government need to be prepared for those changes and agree informally with SADC the level of support that they will provide when called upon.

I may be reading too much into what the Minister said. She chose her words carefully when she said that

no formal discussion was going on with SADC about the rand common monetary area. The issue was widely trailed in South African newspapers, and discussions with other countries were mentioned. I very much hope that the British Government are involved in some informal discussions. I was pleased to hear the governor of the central bank of South Africa say that there was a long way to go before bringing Zimbabwe into the rand-dollar area. In saying that, he was nevertheless recognising that we have started to make some progress towards a potential economic solution for Zimbabwe.

That will be good for Zimbabwe not only economically, but politically. One of the key ways in which Mugabe supports his regime is through foreign exchange deals with the central bank at a preferential rate; he and his ZANU-PF Ministers and members then sell that hard currency on the open parallel market, making vast profits. As well as providing economic stability, this action will help to remove one of the levers of Mugabe's oppression and corruption.

I would like further to reinforce the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) about the governor of the central bank in Zimbabwe. There is no way that that gentleman will play any part in any economic future for Zimbabwe. We know that he is not welcome in the UK. I recognise that we need to work through the EU if at all possible. However, I would be much happier if, in the event that a travel ban cannot be obtained through the EU, the UK had the courage of its convictions and imposed a travel ban in any case.

It is important to prepare for change. When Mugabe goes, things will not get better on day one. Electricity is still likely to go out and foodstuffs will not immediately flow into the country—so, very quickly, we could find that the new regime rather than Mugabe is blamed for those failures. We need to provide support to SADC to plan for that change, and to ensure that food, fuel and electricity are supplied. We need to assist a new Zimbabwe to rebuild a civil society, because, piece by piece, Mugabe has broken down all the institutions of civil society, so that he has not simply the office of President, but the only power that there is.

We need to send the right message, which means working with the African Union, the European Union, the South African Development Community, Thabo Mbeki, and Festus Mogae in Botswana. I was deeply disappointed by the lack of strength in the Minister's earlier comments about the summit in Portugal. I urge other Members to sign early-day motion 1870, calling for Mugabe not to be invited. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea mentioned an article in *The Sunday Times*. It is not just civil servants who are briefing, because an unnamed Minister is quoted as saying:

> "You can be sure Mugabe will get himself photographed shaking Gordon's hand. There's no way that's going to happen...If it means the meeting cannot go ahead, so be it. It's already been delayed for years."

I hope that in summing up, the Minister will make it clear that that position has not been diluted since the weekend press report, as that would be a step backwards.

I fully support the EU travel ban being extended to family members. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall said, sporting relationships are critical. The Government should be sending a much tougher message, not only on cricket but on the World cup in South Africa in 2010, making it clear that free nations are not prepared to play practice games in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

Everyone would want to congratulate Edinburgh university on revoking Mugabe's honorary degree. Just before the changeover in government, I wrote to a previous Foreign Office Minister to inquire about Mugabe's honorary knighthood, granted in 1994. I was unclear whether the Government are able or willing to revoke that knighthood.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: They can.

James Duddridge: My hon. Friend indicates from a sedentary position that the Government can revoke the knighthood. In that case, I am sure that Members of the House who have spoken in the debate, who know a lot about Zimbabwe, will call on the Government to do that with great haste.

Another window of opportunity is coming up with the Kampala Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. It is essential that Zimbabwe be on the agenda. The President of Zimbabwe might have taken his country out of the Commonwealth, but the people of Zimbabwe remain in the Commonwealth. We should use the opportunity of Kampala to advance their cause and make it clear to other African leaders who are critical in private that they need to be critical in public, to make the change that is sorely needed.

5.8 pm

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), who has added new dimensions to the debate and is a respected member of the all-party group. It is also a great pleasure to follow many right hon. and hon. Members who have shown the passion that exists in the House on this issue.

As a relatively new Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs had a very difficult job in facing Members who have great knowledge and understanding of the issue. I did not attack her, because she made the best of that job. If I were her, however, I would have a serious word with my officials when I got back to King Charles street. They did not predict the buttons that the House wanted pressed today, and did not equip her properly to enter the debate.

I shall not go through many of the issues that have been raised in the debate. I find it hard to keep an even tone, because it is difficult for me, as it is for many people who know and love Zimbabwe, to find the adjectives and superlatives to describe what has happened there and those responsible for it.

I believe that, while cruelty and terror are a daily feature of what purports to be government in Zimbabwe, a vicarious cruelty is being visited on the people of Zimbabwe by those in state houses and presidential residences across Africa, whose refusal even to recognise the almost genocidal brutality of the Mugabe regime is ever present. Why do they do this? It is hard to have the optimism that some people have shown in the House today for the future of Africa when that ambivalence at best or connivance at worst exists in some of the African

[Mr. Richard Benyon]

Governments. It is hard to believe that Africa can really move on to where we, the previous Prime Minister and the current Prime Minister desire it to move—a more benevolent and economically successful world—when such attitudes persist.

Like ripples in a pond, this vicarious cruelty extends beyond the continent of Africa. It extends into the chancelleries of Europe. Countries waive or talk about waiving entry bans on Mugabe and a coterie of his supporters to allow this pariah to strut on the world stage. That has been much discussed today. It is hard to overestimate the value that Mugabe puts on being able to strut that stage. It is important that the Minister understands that and comments on it when he replies.

Let me set in context my knowledge and understanding of Zimbabwe. I, like many hon. Members, have travelled widely in that part of Africa. My first visit to Zimbabwe was during what one could call its halcyon days. I travelled in my 20s with a liberal naivety; I actually believed that it could work. I saw wonderful work being done by people who had been implacable enemies only a year or two before. There was a sense of optimism among white farmers, people who had been in the liberation struggle and people who had been stuck in the middle, who were the majority.

I worked with people from this country. The late Black Rod, Sir Edward Jones, who tragically died a few weeks ago—I mourn his death—set up the British military advisory team and worked with the Zimbabwean army to make it into a responsible organisation. At that time, there were rumblings about what was going on in Matabeleland. I saw lorry loads of North Korean troops entering the country and I should have seen then that things were going to go wrong—as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) has just described, they certainly did.

I could describe many more of my experiences in Zimbabwe, but one of the most telling was my visit during the parliamentary elections in 2000 with my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who was then the shadow Foreign Secretary. We worked our way around the country trying to keep ahead of the Central Intelligence Organisation. We encountered Movement for Democratic Change candidates coming out of the darkness to meet with us. I found the experience intensely moving. We all come across courage in our lives and in our constituencies, but more often than not it is displayed as a result of an incident, illness, action or whatever. Here was premeditated courage. These were people who had made a decision to stand for Parliament, to make a stand or to be active politically, knowing that it would put their and their family's lives in danger. That was a tremendous thing to experience. It is wonderful that so many people in Zimbabwe are prepared still to do that. I have worked with the Zimbabwe Democracy Trust here in London and been to Washington to see the wonderful work there to bring pressure on the Government of Zimbabwe.

As has been said in the debate, nothing will change while Mugabe remains in power. Only his removal will stop Zimbabwe from collapsing into a fully fledged failed state. This is where I differ slightly from the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), who seemed to adopt a rather more laissez-faire approach. He seemed to say that change was happening, change would come, that we could not influence it from here and that we should more or less let it happen. I may be misrepresenting him; if so, I apologise. I believe that there is an urgent need for more action because Mugabe and the coterie of thugs around him are totally focused on one date; 2008, the year of the presidential elections. He will do all he can to win those elections.

There are three pinch-points on the Mugabe regime. First, there is the international community: the UK, the Commonwealth, the EU, the G8 and the UN. Much has already been said about their influence and what they can do. Then there are African leaders, particularly those of SADC countries. I have already touched on that. But the one on which I will dwell is the people of Zimbabwe, who provide the best possible opportunity to bring about the change we all want.

I achieved a certain notoriety last week—it is a badge I wear with honour—by being attacked in the *Zimbabwe Herald* about a comment I had made about wanting the people of Zimbabwe to rise up and remove Mugabe. I spoke about wanting to be there for the Ceausescu moment; we remember Ceausescu making a speech to what he thought was an adoring crowd who suddenly turned on him, at which point his face went chalk-white with fear. We know what happened after that.

I am not saying that I want the people of Zimbabwe to rise up in a bloody coup, because they have suffered enough. I want this to be brought about quietly and as expeditiously as possible. However, the people who will pull the plug on this despot are those who are closest to him. I will call them the coterie. Some refer to them as the big men—the likes of Emerson Mnangagwa, Mujuru and others. They can be made to feel the chill wind of their wealth and position threatened by the intransigence and actions of Mugabe.

Many of these people and their families are still able to travel. Many are able to use the shopping malls of the west to spend their ill-gotten gains. Most will have family members studying in Europe, particularly in the UK, and in the United States, or are using these countries for health care—all at a time when education and health care are denied to the people whom these characters have impoverished.

Some time ago I raised with the current Lord Chancellor the possibility of extending the travel ban and sending back people who are studying at our universities because they are the children, cousins or brothers of those people. I cannot remember his exact works, but he said that one cannot visit the sins of the fathers upon the sons. I think we can and the time has come when we must. It is only by putting that sort of pressure on the regime can we make these people go back, at least to witness, if not experience, the misery that is going on in their country, which is being brought about by those who have financed their trips to places such as this country.

Wealth and status is all to the coterie, so it is entirely legitimate for us to seek to remove the benefits of education and health care in this country from these people in whatever form they are taking. I also want the business men—whether in South Africa, the UK, Europe or the United States—who are complicit in

propping up the lifestyles of these individuals and the regime itself to be exposed.

Robert Mugabe controls everything: security, the judiciary, the media. We have heard how he uses food as a weapon of political repression. He controls the purse strings. All of his efforts, and those of the people around him, are working towards winning the 2008 election. The only way he can do that is through the combined uses of electoral fraud, terror and, importantly, patronage. Mugabe has handed out farms, as we all know, to senior officials. Recently he has handed out tractors to officials. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield about the great number of cars that have recently appeared in Harare; they had been handed out to senior security officials. How and where did the regime procure those cars and tractors? Those who did such deals with it are part of the problem. That might be a national issue; China might be complicit in such deals—I do not know whether that is the case. If business men from Britain or any other country are brokering such deals, they must be exposed and the source of patronage must dry up.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Sunderland, South in that I believe that urgent action is necessary as playground economics is being practised—the economy is imploding, there is price-cutting by force, and currency is being printed as if it is confetti. That will bring misery upon misery to the Zimbabwean people, and we must act.

John Bercow: Sadly, many Church figures in Zimbabwe have been bought off. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the next history of Zimbabwe is written—hopefully after the collapse of the current bestial regime—one of the great heroes that will feature in it will be Archbishop Pius Ncube?

Mr. Benyon: I absolutely agree. During my entire life, I will probably meet only four or five people like Pius Ncube. He is a truly humble man who has been subjected to the most appalling attacks—we have heard of the latest attack by the regime—and he remains courageous and a model for us all. He has been recognised in some quarters, but I hope that he will be recognised internationally for his extraordinary work. As we applaud him, we must also deplore those who hold prominent Church positions who have played the tune of Mugabe's regime for too long. They deserve as much excoriation as Pius Ncube deserves praise.

Let me return to the issue of a sporting ban. I was in South Africa in the 1980s. Before I went there, I did not believe that a sporting ban was a particularly effective tool, but when I was there I saw that it was. Mention has been made of banning Zimbabwe from the Olympics and the 2010 World cup. I applaud the Australian Government for simply saying "No", and our Government can do the same. As I said to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), when someone wears a national shirt they are part of the political world. We cannot put that genie back in the bottle. It is important that there is cross-Government understanding: the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, or whichever Department makes decisions on who plays in sporting tournaments throughout the world, must recognise that allowing a Zimbabwean team to visit our country or, even worse, us to play cricket or any other sport in Zimbabwe, would amount to an enormous endorsement of the regime, and that that would certainly be how it would be received in that country.

What we need is good old-fashioned diplomacy. We have given £2.5 billion in bilateral aid to SADC countries. Their economies are being brought down by the actions of the Zimbabwe regime; nearby countries are beginning to feel the impact of what is happening in Zimbabwe. Our taxpayers' hard-earned money is being wasted because those countries will not stand up to Mugabe. I am not saying that aid should be cut; on the contrary, I want aid to be increased, especially to countries in the SADC region. However, we must in return have more leverage, and we should use it to try to put some backbone into some of their leaders.

Like many Members, I am hugely disappointed by much of Thabo Mbeki's record, such as his attitude to HIV and the fact that he has allowed crime to soar. History will judge harshly his tenure as leader of Africa's strongest country, and the litany of failure will certainly include somewhere very near the beginning of the word "Zimbabwe".

I hope that this country can take a lead from countries such as Australia, which has taken robust action against the Government of Zimbabwe. We should also applaud people such as Christopher Dell, the courageous US diplomat, and our high commissioner and the whole team in Harare, who do a fantastic job. Christopher Dell's announcement that ZANU-PF officials' family members who were being educated in the US would be removed was a big step forward, and one that we should follow.

We can also take a lead in many other ways. The Government like to sound new and fresh, and we have announcements to that effect every day. This issue is an opportunity to be fresh and new. We can end the tiptoeing around the subject and the sense of post-colonial guilt syndrome, which my generation feel is in the past and should not be allowed to affect the issue today. The Prime Minister could make a big difference by announcing that he is not going to Lisbon if Robert Mugabe is going, and that we will have a robust and forthright policy on Zimbabwe in the future.

5.26 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I am delighted to wind up in this important debate. I entirely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) that it is a pity that the debate was not postponed. It is an important debate: we do not get many Foreign Office debates, and this afternoon would have been considerably enhanced by the presence of the Foreign Secretary.

I have great admiration for the Minister who opened the debate, but she was cast adrift today without an adequate compass or any warning of the dangers that were likely to beset her. It is a pity that she was not able to give the House some of the realistic answers that it expected today. I will come to some of those issues in a moment.

We had some knowledgeable speeches today from people who have been involved in Zimbabwe for a long time, notably my right hon. and learned Friend, who is a former Foreign Secretary; the hon. Member for

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), former Minister for Africa; and the chairman and vice-chairman of the all-party Zimbabwe group, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton). They have had long experience of the issue and have bravely stood up for the people of Zimbabwe. The House should be grateful to them for sharing their knowledge of the issue today.

We have also been fortunate enough to hear from two new Members of the House, my hon. Friends the Members for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge) and for Newbury (Mr. Benyon), whose contributions were eye-opening. I shall come to some of the issues raised in a minute.

I shall not read out a litany of things that are going wrong in Zimbabwe, as many others have done that. Suffice it to say that the situation in that country has reached a very low ebb. If the UN World Food Programme is to be believed, the current year's bad harvest will lead to up to a quarter of the population requiring food aid next year. Already up to a quarter of the population may have fled, at least 2 million of them to South Africa. The intellectual brain drain will be one of the big problems facing Zimbabwe in the future.

I shall pick out some of the salient points of the excellent speeches we have heard today. I welcome the announcement by the Minister this afternoon when she confirmed Baroness Vadera's announcement in the House of Lords yesterday that an additional £50 million of aid was to be given towards food shortage alleviation and agricultural infrastructure building, and £3.3 million for civil society building. That is very important. If there is any way in which we can help to build civil society in all its aspects, that is to be greatly welcomed.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Vauxhall that the situation needs internationalising. Anybody who has any influence to bear should be brought in. Of course, ultimately—as I said in a question to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) on 26 March—it must be an African solution for an African problem, but that does not mean to say that other international players and individual countries cannot add their expertise and help to bring about a solution.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall was also entirely right to say that we should look to the UN to implement its responsibility to protect. If the international community cannot find mechanisms to enable it to intervene more quickly in places such as Zimbabwe or Sudan's Darfur province, where the suffering and human rights violations are so bad, there is something wrong.

I also agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, who said that the problem may well get worse before it gets better. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southern, East referred to Operation Slash Prices, which follows numerous other difficulties in Zimbabwe. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said that it amounts almost to the confiscation of businesses, when the Government take a 51 per cent. share yet still require them to sell goods in the shops below the costs of production. The effect has been that supplies of the essentials of life—wheat, flour, bread and maize—are drying up fast.

I want to dwell on the remarks made by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South. What comes next? It is almost inevitable that Zimbabwe will collapse in the relatively near future, although it is difficult for us to envisage the form that that will take. The best thing might be that Robert Mugabe will announce that is he going to retire and that someone else will take over. That is unlikely, but it would also be an acceptable solution if the presidential elections due to take place in March next are free and fair and another person is voted in. However, further action by the people of Zimbabwe might be presaged if they are not free and fair, and that would leave a difficult situation that we would have to resolve.

The Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), will respond to the debate, and he will have to answer the many penetrating questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson). I hope that he will also pay some attention to the thinking that the international community has devoted to a post-Mugabe regime. That is critically important.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South raised a number of issues worth considering. One thing that is going wrong is Mugabe's violation of the rule of law, which has all sorts of guises. For example, a change in the law means that Mugabe can manipulate Parliament to elect a president if anything happens to him. In addition, rules have been introduced that restrict people's ability to assemble and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said, new laws allow all sorts of private communications to be monitored.

We need to make sure that the rule of law operates properly in Zimbabwe. We know, for example, that solicitors representing people in jail are themselves being jailed. The rule of law is being brought rapidly into disrepute, and that is one of the first problems that will have to be dealt with.

As I have noted already, Zimbabwe will need a new constitution, and a new and independent electoral commission. I also hope that the electoral register will be properly verified before next year's presidential elections, as it would be entirely unacceptable if we were to find that it had been gerrymandered, with the result that members of one party only were encouraged to vote. In that connection, I hope that the Under-Secretary of State will say whether he has given thought to getting the international community to bring pressure to bear so that the 3 million or so Zimbabweans in Britain, South Africa and elsewhere are allowed to vote.

The security and financial sectors will also need to be reformed. Increasingly, members of the police and armed forces are not being paid, and that is because the Zimbabwean Government are simply running out of money. Officially, inflation is running at 4,000 per cent., but unofficial figures put it very much higher.

We heard a lot in the debate about the governor of Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank, but the bank has no foreign reserves apart from what it gets when it seizes the hard currency gained after a company manages to complete

some trade. It is essential that we have economic reform, a currency reserve fund, a contingency fund and a proper civil service that is able to administer money so that proper civil servants, members of the armed forces and the police are paid, and can do their jobs.

There will need to be emergency food aid. That is already under way. Some of my colleagues—this happened in a debate yesterday—criticise us for giving food aid because they say that it props up the Government of Zimbabwe. I say that we have to find a way of giving the starving people of Zimbabwe food aid without propping up the Government of Zimbabwe. Not to give them food aid would be unacceptable. We will need to find ways of making sure that everybody has enough food, and of ensuring that people have access to a proper health service and a proper education service, and are housed. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield about Operation Murambatsvina—the so-called Clear the Filth operation—that meant that 700,000 people were driven out of their houses in Zimbabwe. When the international community tried to provide tents for them because they were homeless, the tents were seized by the armed forces. That is the extent of Robert Mugabe's regime.

We will need to find a solution not only to the internally displaced people I have just referred to, and many others, but to the refugees, who are mostly, but not exclusively, in South Africa. The sad fact about Zimbabwe at the moment, and perhaps one of the factors that will be quickest in bringing about collapse, is that the most able people are leaving the country. They are the very people—the brightest, the most intellectual people—who need to be retained in the country to run a realistic future.

Somehow, we will also need to come up with a solution to the land redistribution problem—not that that need be a problem in itself, but what needs to happen fairly rapidly is that somehow the farms need to be put back into proper production so that Zimbabwe can at last begin to feed itself and, even more importantly, in the medium term, not only feed itself, but start exporting food. That is one of the main parts of its economy and would mean that it could begin to earn hard currency again.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South referred to something very interesting that I do not think has been addressed before: truth and reconciliation. Zimbabwe will need to have a truth and reconciliation commission similar to the one that we had under the auspices of the archbishop in South Africa. That will mean that those who have not committed gross crimes against humanity can be brought back into the fold and pardoned—because we will desperately need to work with them. The international community and the people of Zimbabwe will need to work with people we would not necessarily want to talk to. A truth and reconciliation commission would be one way of doing that.

There will need to be a considerable package of assistance. I hope that the Minister who is summing up tonight can tell us not only what thinking there has been on how the country can be rebuilt, but who is going to provide that monetary assistance. There needs to be a mechanism, because when the collapse comes, it might come quite quickly. We need to be prepared. We must not be left floundering around for weeks or months trying to come up with a package. The work needs to be done now.

I want to turn to the elections next year. Colleagues have mentioned this issue. There are some encouraging signs that the Opposition party, the MDC, is beginning to come together. I have good reason to believe that, in those presidential elections, Morgan Tsvangirai will be the only candidate. Having one Opposition candidate for the president and one in each electoral district will provide a much more powerful opposition and it will be much less confusing for the people of Zimbabwe. I hope that that happens.

We need to look at international re-engagement and at how the whole effort involving the South Africans and SADC is going to work. One of the most important suggestions that has come out of the Thabo Mbeki mediation process was that we should have a proper UN rapporteur to give added weight and emphasis to the situation. I hope that that can come about. At the same time, we need to send proper signals from the international community to the Mugabe regime.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea, a former Foreign Secretary, is exactly right to say that if the European Union aspires to have a common foreign policy that means anything at all, it needs a common foreign policy on Zimbabwe. That means that we must adopt a common position on who is subject to the travel ban and on the sanctions and assets freezes that are to be applied. While I am on that subject, might add that the assets freeze is pretty weak in this country. I understand that it covers only about 400 bank accounts containing £350,000. Surely the Government could do more in that respect.

We need to ensure that Zimbabwe features on the agenda at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Although Zimbabwe has been suspended from the Commonwealth, it was formerly a member and many of its neighbours are members. The Commonwealth could be better used, so the matter should be on the CHOGM agenda.

I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury that we need to send out the right signals about sporting events. If a national team is to play in Zimbabwe, it is a national responsibility to give those teams a steer. It is no good saying that it is up to the UK cricketing body to make a decision, especially if it is going to lose out financially. It is up to the Government to say quite clearly, "You should not be going to Zimbabwe. If you lose out financially, we will compensate you." The Government's position is anomalous. There was a sporting ban on South Africa, so why should there not be a ban on Zimbabwe, given the similarly dreadful situation there?

We have heard many interesting speeches made by hon. Members with experience. Suffice it to say that the situation in Zimbabwe is quite unacceptable. Zimbabwe is reckoned by some to be the fourth most likely nation in the world to fail. I agree that there will be a form of collapse in Zimbabwe in the near future. I just hope that, when it comes, the Government and the international community will be a little better prepared for it than the Government were for today's debate.

5.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) in responding to this robust debate on the future of Zimbabwe. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Meg Munn), set out the Government's profound concern about the situation in Zimbabwe and the action that we have consistently taken to highlight our concerns and work for a better future for the people of Zimbabwe.

The hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) led for the official Opposition. He echoed the Government's profound concern and asked a series of questions about our policy. I will come to those questions in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) followed the hon. Gentleman. For many years, she has consistently focused attention, both inside and outside the House, on the plight of the people of Zimbabwe. I acknowledge and pay tribute to her long-standing interest in the issue.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett), who led for the Liberal Democrats, has considerable development expertise due to his work on the International Development Committee. He, too, asked a series of questions, and I shall address them during my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) and the right hon. and learned Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) brought their considerable experience of service in the Foreign Office to the debate. The right hon. and learned Gentleman raised a specific point that was echoed by Conservative Members, especially, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall: attendance at the EU-AU summit. I will address that issue shortly.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) has shown a consistent interest in Zimbabwe throughout his time in the House. He highlighted the fact that he made his first visit to Zimbabwe in 1979. I cannot hope to compete with his interest in Zimbabwe or his number of visits to that country over such a long time. However, I remember the sense of optimism that he described about the future of Zimbabwe that followed the Lancaster House agreement. I share the profound frustration and disappointment felt about the fact that that optimism has not resulted in the progress that all Members wanted for Zimbabwe. He was right to say that aid alone cannot solve Zimbabwe's problems. Aid has a place in helping to address those problems, but without improvements to governance, we cannot tackle the terrible plight of the Zimbabwean people.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield was followed by the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), who highlighted the views of the one quarter of Zimbabweans who have left the country because of the terrible economic and political situation there, some of whom now live in his constituency. He was followed by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon), who highlighted the considerable courage of many people who are not members of Robert Mugabe's circle, including those in the Church, in civil society, and in political parties other than ZANU-PF. Despite considerable repression, they have continued to highlight the plight of Zimbabwe's people. I join him, as I am sure the whole House does, in paying tribute to their courage.

Lastly, the hon. Member for Cotswold spoke. He joined other Members in describing the appalling governance that is at the root of the terrible suffering of the Zimbabwean people. There are disastrous economic policies on the one hand and significant appalling human rights abuses on the other. The hon. Member for Macclesfield and others referred to the fact that as the country has continued towards collapse, and as the leadership of Zimbabwe fears for its future, new acts of repression and intimidation, such as arbitrary arrest, beatings and torture, have been carried out. Nobody in Zimbabwean society has escaped that trauma. Journalists, business men, lawyers and trade unionists have all been victims, as hon. Members have described. I join the House in its collective condemnation of the terrible record of Robert Mugabe's Government, who are responsible for the situation in Zimbabwe.

In the very short time that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been in post, he has already spoken to President Mbeki about the Southern African Development Community initiative, and has continued to highlight the British Government's concern about the situation in Zimbabwe. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has spoken to his opposite number in South Africa, and both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have had a series of discussions with a range of Governments, both within the European Union—they have spoken to their German, French and Portuguese opposite numbers—and within the SADC region. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will raise the British Government's profound concerns about the ongoing situation in Zimbabwe at the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels next week. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that we have taken the lead in keeping Zimbabwe on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Council, and we continue to ensure that the Security Council remains focused on the issue.

I shall try to answer the questions that hon. Members asked. Let me start with some of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk. He rightly highlighted Robert Mugabe's continuing attempt to present the dreadful situation in Zimbabwe as a continuation of the anti-colonial struggle, and rightly said that it is nothing of the sort. Contrary to the Zimbabwean Government's propaganda, we have not imposed economic sanctions on the country and its people. Indeed, we have made our support for the people of Zimbabwe clear through the substantial humanitarian assistance that we continue to provide to ameliorate the dreadful impact of failed economic policies.

Our approach to Zimbabwe has been to try to support, and not punish, Zimbabwe's people. We provide direct assistance to the poorest and most vulnerable people in Zimbabwe. Our aid is helping to form part of a response to the Zimbabwean food crisis. This year, more than half the population is likely to need food aid, as Conservative Members and others have said. We will continue to work with the World Food Programme, which, as the hon. Member for Cotswold said, has just

issued a further appeal for the coming months, which we are considering, and to which we will respond shortly. The international community has so far managed to keep malnutrition below emergency levels. I make no higher claim for the humanitarian support that we have been able to provide.

Through our protracted relief programme, we have also reached some 2 million people in the most drought-prone areas of Zimbabwe with seeds, tools, livestock and fertiliser to help them build basic rural livelihoods. The programme has also helped to provide care for the most chronically ill in their homes. We have, for example, supplied some 600,000 people with safe drinking water. As was mentioned, my noble Friend Baroness Vadera announced yesterday that we have just committed some £50 million for a second five-year period for the programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall expressed concern about the politicisation of food aid in Zimbabwe. She is right to highlight the problem, which we strongly condemn. It is the Government of Zimbabwe who have politicised food aid. The food that they have purchased is distributed predominantly to their supporters. Donor-funded aid—aid provided as a result of British money—is channelled through non-governmental organisations and UN agencies, and there is rigorous monitoring to ensure that it goes to people who need it, not to those who Robert Mugabe's Government would like to receive it.

Kate Hoey: I accept the premise of my hon. Friend's remarks. However, although the NGOs may take responsibility up to a point, there is no doubt that out in the rural areas, way beyond the cameras, the journalists and the media, food aid, which has been paid for by my constituents, is being distributed on a political basis according to whether or not people are supporters of ZANU-PF.

Mr. Thomas: As I have said to my hon. Friend, there is no question but that the politicisation of food aid is taking place. Given the monitoring that we ensure takes place and for which others, including those who work for the World Food Programme, take responsibility, the food aid that is distributed by donors goes to the intended beneficiaries. There is no doubt that the food that is purchased by the Government of Zimbabwe goes, sadly, not necessarily to those who need it, but overwhelmingly to the supporters of that Government.

I take my hon. Friend's point in this respect: we cannot afford to relax about the way in which food aid is distributed. We need to continue to monitor to ensure that food aid is consistently distributed to those who should benefit from it. If my hon. Friend or other hon. Members have evidence of any abuse of donor-funded aid, we want to hear about it immediately.

The hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk asked about forced displacement and what the UK Government are doing to support victims of forced displacement. We have provided the International Organisation for Migration with some £5 million for food, shelter, blankets and other lifesaving equipment, to try to ameliorate the impact of forced displacement. We provide humanitarian assistance more generally too to those who have been deported, and we try to offer some protection from abuse to those terribly vulnerable groups who are suffering as a result of forced displacement—unaccompanied children, for example

The hon. Gentleman asked about the safety of British nationals in Zimbabwe. He knows, as do other hon. Members, that we take extremely seriously our duty of care for British nationals across the whole of Zimbabwe. There is a full consular service in Harare and we are making efforts to ensure that all British nationals, including those who are elderly and vulnerable—another point that was made—are aware of the assistance that we can provide through the embassy, and that which is available from other relevant welfare organisations. He also asked whether there are consular contingency plans. Of course, we do have such plans, as we do for all countries should a situation change. I am sure that he will understand if I do not go into more detail at this time.

Let me come to the point raised by all Conservative Members and two of my hon. Friends—the concern about the EU-Africa summit that will, I hope, take place in Lisbon later this year. The right hon. and learned Member for Kensington and Chelsea alluded to the huge governance challenges that there are in Africa. Others referred to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the lack of water, and the fact that too many of Africa's children do not have access to primary school education. Those are issues that the EU should discuss with African Governments, and many bilateral discussions are indeed taking place, but they should also take place at a regional—EU-Africa—level. The last thing that we would want to happen is for those concerns about the broader needs of African nations to be overshadowed by the attendance of Robert Mugabe.

I am aware of the report in *The Sunday Times* that the right hon. and learned Member for Kensington and Chelsea mentioned. He will perhaps understand why I am not going to speculate on how that report appeared. However, I can re-emphasise that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, said in her opening remarks, no invitations to the EU-Africa summit have been issued. We are some way away from the point at which that might happen, and the agenda is not yet settled. The hon. Member for Cotswold pointed out that Robert Mugabe did not attend the summit in France, which is a helpful precedent. I assure hon. Members who have strongly articulated their concerns that there will be plenty of opportunities for the House to consider the question of invitations, as well as the agenda.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: With great respect, the Government need to be clear on the negotiating stance that they are going to take with regard to Robert Mugabe's attendance at the summit. Will the Minister give a clear answer on that matter, if not now, by way of written answer before the House goes into recess, which means that there will not be much chance to discuss it?

Mr. Thomas: As I said, I recognise and understand the profound concern about what might and might not happen in relation to the EU-Africa summit in Lisbon. Again, I say gently to the House that we are not at the point where invitations have been issued, and there will be many opportunities to debate what will or will not happen. I will of course bring to the attention of my

[Mr. Thomas]

right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, and others, the concerns that have been expressed on both sides of the House.

Several hon. Members referred to the governor of the Reserve Bank. Let me make it clear that I believe that he should be on the EU's targeted measures list. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said, he has not sought, thus far, to come to the UK, and he would not be welcome if he did.

Hon. Members asked what further steps we are taking to investigate and seize the assets of those on the visa ban list. More than 130 individuals are on that list, although it was suggested that there are only 120. We are looking into the activities of a whole series of businesses to see whether they are in any way, accidentally or deliberately, helping members of the ZANU-PF elite to get round the ban on assets. Alongside the investigations that are already under way, we are always keen to receive any information that hon. Members might have to help us to seize the assets of those on the list.

It being Six o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Illegal Raves (South-West Norfolk)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Ms Diana R. Johnson.]*

6 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): I am most grateful for the opportunity to raise concern about unlicensed music events known as raves, which are causing huge distress, damage and expense in my constituency. Throughout the summer months they have become a regular feature, and in the past few weeks, residents in Marham, Narborough and Cockley Cley have suffered. Unlicensed music events are hugely profitable to the organisers, and they have nothing to do with the altruistic values of young people. They are a product of a get-rich quick formula that tramples on the rural economy. Costs are minimised, no tax is paid, and there is no regard for anyone or anything but the profit made.

There are plenty of first-class licensed music venues in Norfolk, where events can be held legitimately and safely. I spent a memorable evening last summer with my family at a concert in Thetford forest. The event was extremely well managed by the Forestry Commission; excellent arrangements for public safety, public facilities, car parking, sound and lighting showed just how such events can be staged legitimately. Why should local people put up with unlicensed events on their land if all they amount to is a money-raising exercise for the organisers? Lawbreakers are getting rich at the expense of others, which in itself is criminal, in my opinion.

Constituents tell me that they were terrified by the experience of having up to 1,000 people on their property or near their home, and said how disgusted they were by the litter, human waste and excrement and drug paraphernalia, including needles, left behind after a rave. The Government have a duty to protect the law-abiding majority from the antisocial behaviour of others, and while I am conscious of the rules relating to Adjournment debates, I would like to devote a large proportion of this evening's debate to the shortcomings of the current legislation, and ask the Minister to consider the situation. I do not seek draconian powers that would affect private parties. I know that recent changes have made it easier to disrupt illegal raves, but the reality is that current regulations are not effective deterrents and do not achieve what I believe the objectives of the police should be.

Legislation is geared towards the termination of a rave. Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 allows the police to instruct rave-goers to leave an event. However, unless substantial numbers of police officers are quickly mustered, without notice, in rural areas at night, it is extremely difficult and potentially dangerous to try to end a party already in full swing. One journalist in the national press described the effects of an attempt by police to break up an illegal rave last year:

> "Two hundred riot police from five counties dispersed the 1,000 party goers. During the clashes a police car was set on fire and nine officers were wounded, with injuries to police including a suspected broken collarbone and a severed finger. At least two revellers were also injured. Thirty people were arrested and released on bail."

Given this risk, police have to judge whether intervention is realistic. In many cases, they can do little more than monitor the event, and the organisers of the raves rely on that fact. They know that they will get away with it; that is why it is such good business for them. It appears that the organisers of the Marham event arranged for motorcyclists to help move their mobile equipment en route to the event. They also had heavies present, wearing hoods and balaclavas. The police attended but soon withdrew when it became clear that they could only monitor what was going on.

It often seems to the public that the police are not doing all they can to prevent a rave, but the site of the party is often revealed only a few hours or minutes beforehand, specifically so that the police have no time to act. That means that the law relating to the prohibition of "trespass assemblies", which requires an application to the district council for a prohibition order, cannot be applied. The police have the power to direct people away from a rave in a 5 mile radius of the site, but in the maze of country lanes that criss-cross Norfolk, that would demand huge numbers of police and is not workable.

In practice, the principal offence is:

"Failing to leave the site of a rave as soon as reasonable, once directed to do so."

Again, Norfolk constabulary simply does not have the resources to round up and arrest hundreds of young people who have no intention of leaving. Does the Minister agree that it would be helpful to make attendance at a rave an offence? What about an offence of organising, or being involved in organising, an event?

I am also concerned that the law focuses on single events. It does not pave the way to prosecuting persistent organisers or serial rave-goers. Power to confiscate equipment relates only to the failure to leave today's event, and is not retrospective. Norfolk constabulary told me:

"Because the legislation is aimed at stopping an event, interrogating and possibly arresting people leaving a site at the end of a rave is not within the spirit of the law."

Does the Minister agree that the ability to gather vital intelligence about regular rave-goers, the identity of the organisers or plans for future raves would be hugely helpful to the policing process? Would not it give the police a fighting chance of making progress?

What about the impact of such events on local people? Current legislation suggests that the only disruption caused by a rave comes from music which,

"by reason of its loudness and duration and the time at which it is played, is likely to cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality."

Although I do not underestimate the disturbance that continuous loud music causes, the illegal gatherings have other, equally distressing effects on local communities.

The presence of hundreds of people and vehicles in rural areas can cause terrible damage to farmers' fields, livestock and crops. We must not forget that when those are damaged, that has an impact on the livelihood of farmers going about their legitimate businesses. A farmer in my constituency recently wrote to me, saying:

"to protect my pigs from party-goers, I had to be present on my field from 3.30 in the morning until 8 o'clock the following night. On one occasion when I left for 5 minutes, I returned to find 4 men chasing them around their pens."

Is it any wonder that he was devastated to discover that the law appears to be on the side of the party-goers rather than on his side?

I have been advised that section 63 powers cannot be enforced in remote rural locations where there are only a few local residents. The law requires

"serious distress to be caused to the inhabitants of the locality."

That seems unfair—one law for urban areas and another for the countryside. It also suggests that a rave in the countryside is acceptable because only a few people suffer. Like my constituents, I take exception to that principle.

As the excellent Norfolk Farmwatch organisation told me, a small number of residents in a remote location can feel even more vulnerable than those in a village or town. I know of one elderly couple in my constituency who barricaded themselves into their isolated home for more than 12 hours while 1,000 revellers passed within feet of their front door. Two weeks later that couple were still trying to clear up the debris left in their barn. In a civilised society, how can the law ignore such people?

The existing criteria also fail to take account of the significant distress or damage caused to wildlife and plant life. Under section 28P(6) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is an offence to "intentionally or recklessly" destroy or damage any of the features of a site of special scientific interest, but only if the person knows that they are within an SSSI. Most rave-goers will be entirely ignorant of the existence of an SSSI and will therefore not be liable for any damage that they cause, no matter how serious. Why should ignorance be a factor? Natural England and the Countryside Council for Wales both have powers to make byelaws under section 28R of the 1981 Act for

"the protection of a site of special scientific interest."

As far as I can determine, the power is rarely if ever used to control the harm caused by ravers. I should be interested to hear the Minister's comments on that.

It is true that a number of rave organisers have been successfully prosecuted, but there is concern about the leniency of their sentences, which give those making huge profits little incentive to give up their business. There is an urgent need to review maximum sentences and even to elevate such offences from the magistrates court to the Crown court. Those found guilty face three months' imprisonment or a fine of up to £2,500. A Crown court could impose sentences twice as severe. Such a move would reflect the seriousness with which the Government view such crimes. Should the fines imposed take into account the cost of clearing up the site? Yes, they should. Many local landowners have spent thousands of pounds clearing their land with no help from anyone—yet another illustration of the imbalance that the rural economy has to fight.

The final issue that I want to raise is licensing. Norfolk constabulary and our local councils have told me that the Licensing Act 2003 could unintentionally facilitate raves, because it is possible to submit a temporary event notice application. The police then have just 48 hours to object, but objections can be lodged on only crime and disorder grounds. There is a view that the prospect of excessive noise might not be sufficient for the council to refuse the application. The 48-hour limit could be a particular problem if the application is

[Mr. Christopher Fraser]

delivered to a rural, largely unmanned police station on a Friday afternoon. If a licence application is granted, the benefit to the police is that it would bear the name of the organiser, against whom charges could be brought for noise and other disturbance. That in itself is reason enough for rave organisers to continue to hold unlicensed illegal events.

In conclusion, the problem of raves continues, despite recent changes in legislation. Far from the perception that the police are not using existing powers, it seems that they are in part prevented from acting because of legislative constraints. We will dissuade people from holding and supporting illegal gatherings only if the Government show that they are serious in their intent and provide an effective deterrent. I have known the Minister as a fellow parliamentarian for some time, and he has been honourable and fair in all my dealings with him. I hope that he will give an assurance to local landowners and others in constituencies such as mine throughout the country that they have a right to protection against these illegal events.

6.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Vernon Coaker): I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mr. Fraser) on securing this Adjournment debate on illegal raves. It is an extremely important matter, and he made his points in his usual dignified, concise and intelligent way. His constituents will know that he has raised this issue with me on a number of occasions, and he is standing up for them by raising what is an important issue not only for the people of Norfolk but for those in other parts of the country. The debate relates specifically to his constituency, but it will have a broader impact as well. I congratulate him on his work on trying to secure a benefit for his constituents that could affect other citizens of this country. I hope that I shall answer all his questions in the course of my speech, but if I appear to be reaching the end without having done so, he may wish to intervene.

I am aware of rave events occurring in the hon. Gentleman's constituency this year, and I share his anxiety that they should not become an opportunity or an excuse for disorder, antisocial activity, criminality or behaviour that intimidates and alienates members of local communities. Nor should those events facilitate illicit drug cultures, with which they have also been associated. I also realise that the effects of raves are not limited to the duration of the event itself. These gatherings can cause traffic congestion to small and wholly unsuited roads, and also lead to the depositing of huge quantities of rubbish, ruining local residents' surroundings.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Home Office is committed to tackling criminality and antisocial behaviour, whatever form it takes. I welcome this opportunity to discuss raves, to outline the relevant legislation, and to update Members on the concerted efforts being made by the police to tackle the problem. We regard it as an extremely important matter that deserves our full attention.

I shall begin with the relevant legislation. The police are equipped with a number of powers specifically to deal with raves in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Following close liaison with the police on the changing nature of raves, that legislation was further updated in the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003. The police have powers to direct 20 or more rave-goers to leave an event. They also have pre-emptive powers to direct two or more persons preparing for a rave to leave land. It is a criminal offence to ignore those directions. The police also have powers to seize vehicles or sound equipment, and to direct people away from a gathering that has already been prohibited.

The hon. Gentleman and his constituents should also be aware that those successfully convicted may receive three month's imprisonment or a fine. We always keep those matters under review, and I take his point about the need for sentencing to send out a message of deterrence to people who choose to ignore the law. Regarding enforcement, in the years from 2001 to 2005, 15 persons were prosecuted for failing to leave land when directed. Five of them were convicted. Also, three persons were prosecuted for failing to comply with a direction not to proceed in the direction of a rave, and one person was convicted. I repeat that we want the police to deal robustly with those events and, indeed, that we want the courts to support the police in their work.

It is not just legislation specific to raves that can be used by the police. I mentioned at the outset that unlawful raves have been associated with low-level public disorder, unacceptable nuisance and the possession of unlawful drugs. Members will know that a whole raft of legislation is in place and available to the police to deal with those offences—for example, sections 1 to 5 of the Public Order Act 1986, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and even antisocial behaviour orders. Clearly, a range of other legislation in respect of public order offences, drugs misuse and so forth is available to the police for dealing with illegal raves.

Authorities in Norfolk served a temporary antisocial behaviour order on a 62-year-old man accused of masterminding a series of illegal raves in the county. The ASBO prevents him from organising or participating in any further events in the area. As the hon. Gentleman will know, should he breach that ASBO, it would amount to a criminal offence in itself. In Thames Valley, the police have also put resources into tackling illegal raves through ASBOs, resulting in orders being placed on a couple of rave organisers, with more cases pending. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that those actions have been successful in preventing raves in the Thames Valley area.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of mess or rubbish left behind at rave sites. As he will know, a series of Acts of Parliament can be used to tackle the problem. For example, leaving litter is an offence under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and provisions in the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 give authorities the power to deal with fly-tipping and littering of the sort that he mentioned. More recently, the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 provides considerably increased powers and levels of punishment in respect of those offences.

Mr. Fraser: May I make one observation? I accept and understand the laws that the Minister refers to, but they may well be more effective in an urban environment where it is easier to maintain surveillance on people. In

very rural areas, where the fields are usually without light, it is much more difficult to catch people in the act of committing such offences.

Mr. Coaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, which I accept, and some of my later remarks may help to address it.

The use of legislation in an operational context is entirely a matter for the strategic direction that a chief officer provides for his or her force. Whether it be in an urban or rural area, this is an extremely important issue, which this debate helps to reinforce. Tactics on how individual raves should be policed are at the discretion of the officers deployed at the scene of an event and involve difficult judgments on minimising disturbance to local communities and residents, preventing any escalation in public disorder and ensuring the safety of police officers and rave-goers.

Although the detail of operational decisions is not necessarily a matter for ministerial interference, Ministers are keen—and I am certainly keen—to see best practice in policing raves disseminated across the police service, including in Norfolk. In that regard, a workshop on policing raves was hosted in June by the recently established National Policing Improvement Agency, which was attended by 100-plus police officers from around the country, including officers from Norfolk. I understand that police tactics, the sharing of intelligence, partnership working, national guidance and current legislation—issues also raised by the hon. Gentleman this evening—were all discussed, and that the feedback from the workshop will be collated and used both to promote short-term steps that forces can take further to improve their response to raves, and to inform longer-term strategic work, including whether any changes to legislation are required.

That should be of help to the hon. Gentleman, because, clearly, such a workshop will consider issues such as the policing of raves in remote rural areas, and the sharing of good practice between police forces, especially when one force has found a particular way of operating to be effective. I take his point that there is a big difference between policing a rave in a remote part of Norfolk and policing a rave in a field on the edge of London, for example.

The sub-group on raves, which was set up by the Association of Chief Police Officers working group on public order, provides an appropriate forum to take work forward, and further underlines police commitment to work nationally to improve policing of illegal raves. ACPO has recognised that the problem is growing, and the sub-group is building on work done in an earlier forum. I shall ask my officials to read the record of the debate, and to send the relevant points made by the hon. Gentleman to that working group for consideration. That might benefit him and perhaps other Members across the country who have had such problems. He asked, if I remember rightly, whether it would be possible for attendance at a rave, or organising a rave, to be made a criminal office. The group will be able to consider whether that is appropriate, whether other legislation covers that, or whether something could be done.

On the importance of partnership working, the hon. Gentleman might also like to know that the Local Government Association announced last month a five-point plan for councils to combat illegal raves. That included work with police and other agencies, intelligence gathering, which is crucial, and asking landowners to be vigilant. He might want to ask his local authority whether it is aware of that, and what steps if any it is taking in that respect.

Clearly, the hon. Gentleman called the debate because of concerns in his constituency of South-West Norfolk. I therefore want to conclude by providing him with some reassurance that Norfolk police are taking the matter seriously. They have an analyst working part-time monitoring rave websites, and the force holds a database of music rigs that are being used to organise raves in the Norfolk area. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, help to gather intelligence is critical if we are to move forward in this area. We are therefore required to look at rave websites, magazines and other types of media in which information about where an illegal rave might take place is shared. I congratulate Norfolk police on their use of an analyst, as that can help us to deal with the problem. Officers from Norfolk, Essex and Suffolk, together with other agencies, gathered information during this year's Easter and May bank holidays to prevent illegal raves from taking place.

I hope that those remarks give the hon. Gentleman some reassurance, particularly my suggestion that the points that he has made should be referred to the ACPO sub-group, and that it should be asked to look at the legislation again, consider whether improvements can be made, share good practice and do something to prevent the appalling things that his constituents have had to suffer at the hands of people whose only goal is to make a good deal of money. Such a situation is not acceptable, and we need to work together to try to do even more about it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Six o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 23 July 2007

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Renaissance in the Regions

1. **Mr. Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the impact of the renaissance in the regions programme. [151094]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (James Purnell): Renaissance in the regions is transforming England's regional museums. More than 13 million visits were made to renaissance hub museums last year, of which 3.7 million visits were made by children.

Mr. Jones: May I first congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment to his new post, and add that I am sad that my good friend the hon. Member for East Devon (Mr. Swire) is not on the Conservative Front Bench? Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the north east regional museums hub, which with Government support has generated record numbers of school visits to museums throughout the north-east, including Beamish open air museum in my constituency, which received 43,000 school visits last year? Will he take time out of his busy schedule to visit Beamish museum and the north-east museums hub to thank them for the tremendous work they are doing on behalf of the museum service in the north-east?

James Purnell: I would be delighted to visit Beamish with my hon. Friend and to see the work being done in the north-east. The £1.4 million that has been invested has enabled us to treble the number of visits by children, and Beamish is only one of the many world-class cultural attractions in the north-east. Thanks to the money that has been invested over the past 10 years, culture in Britain is truly world class, and my goal is to make sure that it stays that way.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State to his post and say how much I am looking forward to him and his Ministers visiting Stonehenge? One element of the renaissance in the regions programme is to do with archives of museum and archaeological material. Will he look into the problem in the English Heritage and Department for Culture, Media and Sport project for archives in the regions, which has ground to a halt causing a crisis in access to archaeological and museum archives?

James Purnell: I know that the hon. Gentleman has raised that matter in previous questions. Funding for local archaeological services is primarily the responsibility of local authorities, but we are looking into the matter and I would be happy to meet him to discuss any specific concerns he might have.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post. I am sure that he is as enthusiastic about access for his constituents to museums and libraries in Manchester and the north-west as I am about such access for mine. However, is he aware that the renaissance in the regions programme is successful not only because so many young people are visiting our museums and libraries but because many of them come from non-traditional museum and library-visiting homes? Can we ensure that money is in place in the future to enable the programme to continue?

James Purnell: As my hon. Friend knows, we are still in discussions on our spending review settlements and it would be brave to make a commitment before that is decided. However, I can say that I share his strong support for renaissance in the regions. It is not a one-off project; we intend it to be ongoing. It builds on our other great successes in museums policy, such as our free charging policy which is being imitated by the right-wing Government in France—although, it appears, not by the British Opposition Front-Bench team—and is being followed with interest around the world.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box, although I should add that I am also sad that the right hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Tessa Jowell) has departed from the post. He is a young man of great promise, and I am sure that he will do well. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of recent Culture, Media and Sport Committee warnings about rumoured cuts to renaissance in the regions funding. Will he assure the House that he will heed those warnings, particularly as we learn today that per capita lottery arts funding in England has fallen to its lowest level ever—a full £1 less than four years ago, and four times lower than in Scotland and eight times lower than in Wales?

James Purnell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, overall lottery revenue has been declining, which explains the situation he describes. We intend renaissance in the regions to be an ongoing programme. It is a successful project and the Select Committee said that it provided the Treasury with an example of an ideal programme to be funded. I am sure that such comments will be taken on board, but we cannot make any announcements before the spending review.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Last Saturday morning I visited Bolton museum and art gallery, where I met one of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's constituents, Frances McIntosh,

who pointed out that the portable antiquities scheme will run out of funding at some time in the future. Will my right hon. Friend consider the funding of that scheme, because I saw on Saturday morning—part of national archaeology week—that it does excellent work in engaging children in archaeology?

James Purnell: That picks up on the point that was being made by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. I am committing myself to lots of meetings, but I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that.

Casinos

2. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the casinos proposed under the Gambling Act 2005. [151096]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (James Purnell): I set out my next steps in the written statement that I gave on Monday 16 July. I have written to the 16 local authorities recommended to license a large or small casino to confirm their continued desire to do so.

Tom Brake: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. In September 2004, the Government stated that their approach to casinos would secure protection of the vulnerable and ensure that new, regionally significant casino developments delivered optimum tourism and regeneration benefits. What has changed since that statement, and why was that new-found prudence not mentioned by the Prime Minister and other Ministers when they voted for up to 40 new regional casinos?

James Purnell: I am slightly confused, because I thought that the Liberal Democrats opposed that policy. Perhaps there is a split between the Liberal Democrat spokesman for London and the Front-Bench spokesman on this issue. Our policy is clear: we have listened to the concerns expressed in the House and in the other place and, as the Prime Minister said, the right thing to do is to see whether there are better forms of regeneration than a regional casino. We will be looking at that over the summer and will report afterwards. I hope that that helps the hon. Gentleman to reconcile with his Front Benchers, with whom he obviously disagrees.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) and I have both read his written statement very carefully. It is important to put it in the context of the Prime Minister's remarks at Prime Minister's questions. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why the super-casino has been such a major issue in my constituency has been the need for a major and significant economic regenerator that sustains instead of just building new infrastructure? Will he give me an assurance that the issue of a sustained economic regenerator will be central to his considerations this summer?

James Purnell: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I gather that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), who has responsibility for sport and licensing will meet him later this week to discuss that point. Regeneration will be at the heart of those considerations. As my hon. Friend knows, the taskforce looking at his constituency and council area has already met and is due to report shortly. It has been looking at exactly that issue.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Can the Secretary of State enlighten the House as to why, only a week or so ago and from that Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister changed the Government's policy on casinos at a stroke? Was not the Prime Minister present at Cabinet meetings that endorsed the 888 principle?

James Purnell: It is sensible to listen to what Parliament says. Concerns were expressed in this House and in the other place: we listened to those concerns. I know that the hon. Gentleman was a great supporter of the policy, so he must be very disappointed, but the policy that we have announced is right. We will listen to the concerns that are expressed.

Mr. Jeremy Hunt (South-West Surrey) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. He has a personal interest in the arts and culture, although I fear that with him behind the roulette table, the country may learn that it is unwise to gamble everything on red.

Was the Cabinet consulted on the decision to cancel the super-casino or was it taken from the comfort of a large, soft No. 10 sofa?

James Purnell: There was a proper process of consultation around Government. The Prime Minister and I took the decision together after discussions with colleagues in the Cabinet. It was exactly the right process for taking that decision.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position on the Front Bench, as part of his meteoric rise. I also pay tribute to my predecessor. I am looking forward greatly to working with her in her new role and I could not have greater respect for her. I also pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's predecessor, for whom I also have great respect. He made the one cardinal mistake in today's Tory party of actually having a policy. I am sure that that is not a mistake that the hon. Gentleman will repeat.

Mr. Hunt: I think that the answer is that the Cabinet was not consulted on the decision to cancel the super-casino. Is not the confusion that many local authorities now feel about the policy partly caused by the fact that on the one hand we have No. 10 briefing that the Prime Minister is against casinos in principle, but on the other we have the Secretary of State's statement on 16 July that his Department wishes to support local authorities who want to use casinos as a regeneration tool? What is his policy on casinos, or is it the case that the Government's left one-armed bandit does not know what its right one-armed bandit is doing?

James Purnell: The hon. Gentleman should listen to the answer, because I gave him an exact answer, which was that Cabinet colleagues were consulted, and the

decision was taken in absolutely the proper way. However, the interesting question is, "What is his policy?". I have been listening to him for the past few weeks and I have absolutely no idea. Does he agree with his shadow Chancellor, his leader and his predecessor, all of whom said that it was the right decision that the casino should to go to Manchester? Is his party in favour of regional casinos or not?

Tourism

3. **Sarah McCarthy-Fry** (Portsmouth, North) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the impact of recent security incidents on tourism to England. [151097]

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Margaret Hodge): I am pleased to tell the House that VisitBritain and tourism industry leaders have reported only a negligible impact on tourism, with few booking cancellations.

The firm and effective response by the police and security services did much to reassure domestic and overseas visitors. Likewise, the fact that many high-profile televised events went ahead in London, such as the Diana tribute concert, the Gay Pride march and the Tour de France—in Scotland, there was also the T in the Park festival—did much to reassure visitors.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Portsmouth is the historic home of the Royal Navy and is held in great esteem and affection by many people from all over the world. We have many naval heritage and service heritage sites, which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors, both national and international. What advice would my right hon. Friend give those visitors in this time of heightened national security?

Margaret Hodge: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I would advise them to go to Portsmouth because, as she said, there is an enormous amount to see, including HMS Victory, the Mary Rose and Charles Dickens's birthplace. Of course, to ensure their security we give constant advice on security levels. We in the DCMS work with the Home Office and others to ensure that we give proper advice to all those who provide tourist attractions.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): May I welcome the Minister and the entire new Front-Bench team to their posts? However, the Minister will be aware that security incidents do affect tourism, and there was, for instance, a 7 per cent. drop in visa applications following the 7/7 bombings. In those circumstances does not tourism need more support, not less? Will she therefore explain why the Government have cut the funding to VisitBritain, with the loss of 80 jobs, downgraded the role of the chairman of VisitBritain and delayed yet again the publication of the tourism plan for 2012?

Margaret Hodge: In fact, 2005, which was an extremely difficult year, saw a growth in tourism in London. It is really important for all hon. Members to realise that when there are terrorism threats and security threats, we should not overplay them at the expense of British industry in general and tourism in particular.

The funding for VistBritain is £50 million, which is much more than when we came into government. Across the public sector, about £300 million goes into supporting tourism, and, of course, the private sector plays a role.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the short delay in publishing the tourism strategy for the Olympics. It is absolutely appropriate, with a completely new team in the DCMS, that we feel that we own that document. I have already had discussions with the industry, which feels perfectly at ease with the fact that the document will be published in September.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady make sure that her Department gets across the message that London is open for business—particularly the west end of London, although the same applies to suburban London, as I am sure that she would make clear? Our theatres, museums, and galleries, as well as a vast array of retail outlets, are very much open for business and very much need tourism, both international and from within the UK.

Margaret Hodge: As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, London is the No. 1 international destination for tourists, and we need to maintain that and ensure that it is sustained in the future. However, we also want to ensure that visitors to London take advantage of the many other tourist attractions right across the UK, so that the benefit is felt by all regions of the country.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): Although the Minister says that there is relatively little change in inward tourism, the fact is that, no matter what measures are taken to deter people by making it more difficult to fly, the numbers increase. The fact is that our seaside resorts are crying out for more tourists. Will she take note of the Select Committee report that identified poor transport links as the real problem of getting people into British seaside resorts?

Margaret Hodge: The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that the balance of trade deficit remains a growing one, and we need to address that issue constantly and properly, to encourage more inward-bound tourists and to ensure that more people stay in the UK and enjoy the many attractions that we have here on their holidays. As he knows, in my previous job, I took a particular interest in ensuring the regeneration of many of our seaside towns. I will maintain that interest in my current job. Although he alluded to one issue—transport infrastructure—there are many others, and I look forward to working with him and others who are affected by the decline in tourism at seaside resorts to ensure their proper regeneration, so that they, too, can enjoy the prosperity that the rest of Britain enjoys.

Music Studios

4. **Ian Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): If he will discuss with ministerial colleagues increasing Government spending on music studios accessible to young people. [151098]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (James Purnell): With my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, we have

asked the former Live Music Forum chairman, Feargal Sharkey, to work with key music industry figures, local and regional government and other potential partners to explore what funding opportunities might exist to establish a network of music rehearsal and performance spaces across the country.

Ian Lucas: I am delighted to hear that announcement from the new Secretary of State. In Wrexham, the energy, enthusiasm and talent of young people has been harnessed excellently by Wrexham youth service and a studio has been opened. It is hugely successful, engaging young people and creating bands for the future. Of course, bands are one of the UK's greatest exports. I am delighted that he has appointed Feargal Sharkey, who opened the Wrexham studio, to take that forward. Will he please encourage as many hon. Members as possible, from both sides of the House, to get involved with young people and to encourage the opening of studios in their constituencies?

James Purnell: I am very happy to do so, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for helping to bring the project to Wrexham, which will lead the way in rehearsal spaces and has shown the great advantage that they can have, both in giving young people something positive to do and, we hope, in creating successful bands in the future. We are looking forward to working with the music industry to ensure that more such spaces can be opened around the country and that they can provide technical and creative expertise to help the industry to grow.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. He may be aware that Luton Youth Music is quite wonderful, quite superb, with hundreds of young musicians playing music of all kinds. Nine days ago, the Luton Youth Jazz orchestra was judged to be the best youth jazz orchestra in the country at the national youth music festival in Birmingham. May I invite my right hon. Friend to visit Luton to talk to the young musicians and, indeed, the adults who service them to find out what facilities the young musicians would like?

James Purnell: How could I resist? We will ensure that we visit Luton, as well as potentially the constituency of every other Member who is in the House today, and I look forward to doing so and seeing whether Luton can be one of the places that successfully bids for one of those rehearsal spaces.

PE Lessons

5. **Mr. Dai Havard** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families on provision of physical education lessons in schools in the last 12 months. [151099]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): The Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport work jointly to deliver the national school sport strategy. Eighty per cent. of children in school sport partnerships now do at least two hours of high-quality PE and school sport a week. Both Departments will continue to work closely to develop the plans to offer all children and young people five hours a week of sport.

Mr. Havard: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but I notice that the title of his colleague with whom he will hold discussions is the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. In those discussions, will he also consider the facilities that are being made available to families, so that parents can join their children in physical education? Will he also ensure that any good practice that is developed will be discussed with Ministers from the devolved Administrations, so that we can have a programme that benefits the whole United Kingdom?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I appreciate my hon. Friend's warm acceptance of what we are trying to do, and I assure him that this really is about participation and ensuring that schools and community sport come together and that, with the £100 million that we will spend, we really do increase participation in sport.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Does the Minister accept that, although physical education is good for all young people, and perhaps also for quite a number of adults, team sports in schools are particularly important? Team sports can inculcate discipline and a sense of working together. Team spirit and team sports are critical. What emphasis is the Minister—*[Interruption.]* I know that we can have a lot of sport in here today. What emphasis is the Minister placing on team sport?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman is taking the idea of team work and competition seriously. Obviously, he can talk to members of his Front Bench about how he can do that within the Conservative party, although I think it will be difficult. On the serious point about competition in schools, over many years competition has been seen as a dirty word. It is important to make competition a key element of inter-school and intra-school sport. The announcement last week will help to do that. Clearly, a lot of work has to take place with the national governing bodies of sports and the schools associations, but if we are united, we will see a sea change in competitive sport, which will bring benefits in terms of team work, competition and individual development.

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It was welcome to hear last week about the additional support for sports in schools, but in real terms it will mean about £3 extra per child per year for children in our schools. That is against the backdrop of a 50 per cent. cut in lottery funding for grassroots sports. Is the Minister confident that sports teachers will be able to deliver on the Prime Minister's promise of making participation in sport a new British characteristic?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I hope that I do not detect that the hon. Lady is decrying the Olympics and the proper funding of the Olympics. She is right to make the point about the £100 million. It is additional money, on top of the money that is spent on school sports anyway. A great deal of that money will go towards coaching, the development of coaching, and the competition

managers who will assist teachers. I am confident that the money will be well spent and that it will deliver what we all want to see: increased competition and participation in school sport.

Community Amateur Sports Club Scheme

6. **Mr. Andy Reed** (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the community amateur sports club scheme; and if he will make a statement. [151100]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): The community amateur sports club scheme has, since its introduction in 2002, seen 4,380 clubs register and Deloitte estimates that that has saved more than £19.7 million for community sport through mandatory rate relief and gift aid. However, I believe that this represents a small percentage of the clubs that are eligible for CASC status and I encourage hon. Members and local authorities to publicise the benefits of the scheme as widely as possible.

Mr. Reed: As my hon. Friend knows, I have taken a keen interest in the matter since I introduced my ten-minute Bill in 2000. The Government caved in two years later and included the provision in the Budget. It has been worth about £19 million, but is he aware—he hinted at this—that that probably involves only about 10 per cent. of the clubs that are eligible for the scheme? The form is probably one of the simplest that the Inland Revenue has ever produced. Will he work with local authorities, in particular—because they have the ability to push the message to sports clubs in their areas—to ensure that people know that there is a tax benefit, money is available and the process is easy to undertake? He should encourage everybody up and down the country to play their part. I encourage Members to try to write to every sports club in their area to achieve wider coverage.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for supporting the initiative. He started the whole thing off with a ten-minute Bill. That has resulted in support for community sport. He is quite right: we think that there are about 40,000 clubs that could get involved and they could see savings of £60 million. There is a leaflet available in the Department and I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members will ask me for a copy. He is right that we need to speak to local authorities. My predecessor wrote to them, but we need to do that again. This is an opportunity for money to go back into sport very easily and quickly, and I hope that Members will support that.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): May I add my congratulations to the Minister and his colleagues? If he really wants to achieve what he has indicated that he wants to achieve, should he not talk to his colleague in charge of schools? What would do more than anything else to improve community sport throughout the country would be a restoration of the days when all schools had teams—many teams—and most schools had playing fields as well.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming me to my post. With your indulgence Mr. Speaker, I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), who was the longest-serving Minister for Sport and did a tremendous amount of work in that role. I am happy to do the job. There has never been a better time to be the Minister with responsibility for sports. May I put on record my congratulations to Mr. Padraig Harrington for winning the British Open yesterday? That was a tremendous feat.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right: we need to develop competition in school sports and we are doing that through the investment of the £100 million. He is quite right that, as the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) said, that brings advantages such as team work. We have put in place a much more rigorous way of dealing with the sale of school playing fields. I am pleased that last year there was a net gain of 35 playing fields, so we have arrested the decline in numbers.

British Film Institute

7. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on the future of the British Film Institute's archive. [151101]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (James Purnell): The Government are firmly committed to protecting and increasing access to the British Film Institute's archive. Of the £16 million a year that the BFI receives in grant in aid, it invests £6.2 million specifically in the archive.

David Taylor: After the Tory by-election candidate selection a few weeks ago turned into a Southall farce, we now find that the Ealing comedies and other films of that era may decay into dust for want of central finance to copy and conserve them. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is a real problem of paramount importance?

James Purnell: I certainly agree that the BFI archive is a national treasure. It is arguably the finest film and television archive anywhere in the world and I assure my hon. Friend that it is safe in our hands.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State undertake to do what he can to ensure that films, particularly drama productions, depicting regions across the United Kingdom that receive funding from his Department continue to do so? Will he also ensure that they are not filmed in central Europe—that has been the experience of many companies in Northern Ireland—but in the regions that they depict?

James Purnell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have recently introduced a new tax break to ensure that we can do exactly that. It is available both to people from Northern Ireland and to all the nations and regions in the country. It has been a great success for the film industry and for tourism, because it has attracted people to this country to visit the places that feature in our great films, so we are doing exactly what he suggests.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to one of the most exciting jobs in Government. Some of us who contributed to the document, "A Bigger Picture", which remains the most comprehensive review of the British film industry, and which supports the Film Council, still think that the British Film Institute has an important role, not least because of its responsibilities for preserving the film archives, which represent some of the best material, not only in Britain, but in the world.

James Purnell: That is right, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's role in producing that policy document and in reforming support for the film industry in this country. That work has been a great success and that is to his credit. He is right to say that the archive needs to be supported and protected, but obviously we cannot make any announcements ahead of the spending review. It is right that we not only protect the archive, but modernise the way in which it is used. The BFI has introduced important proposals, such as proposals for ensuring that it is made available online, and I know that many schools are already using that facility all around the country. We need to protect what we have and ensure that there is wide access to it.

Sport England

9. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Sport England on the potential contribution of sport to community regeneration; and if he will make a statement. [151103]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): I have had no discussions on that subject, although my predecessor and officials have had discussions with Sport England.

Sport plays a key role in a number of areas of community social regeneration. Sports projects can have a significant impact by breaking down barriers and providing positive opportunities for people to mix with others. Sport can help reduce crime and antisocial behaviour and increase people's levels of trust and community involvement.

Mr. Allen: Does the Minister think that Sport England should play a more mainstream role in regeneration and that it should build up our communities, and work together with other bodies on issues of health, crime reduction, and the education of our young people? Does he feel that its image, which is dominated by the blazerati who seem to corner a lot of the money at a national level, needs to be changed so that youngsters at a local level can enjoy sport not only for its own sake, but for the wider benefits that it brings through regeneration?

Mr. Sutcliffe: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend, with whom I have played sport—cricket or football—on numerous occasions. I know his sporting prowess. He hits the nail on the head when he suggests ensuring that Sport England get involved in community regeneration. I know that he will shortly meet the chief executive of Sport England, Derek Mapp, to discuss what is going on in Nottinghamshire. He knows that the sports participation rate in Nottinghamshire is low, and I am pleased that he chairs the local strategic partnership to help develop and increase participation. Nobody knows better than I, a former Home Office Minister, the impact that sport can have on reducing reoffending and diverting people to other routes. I am sure that Sport England will take up the challenge, and I look forward to working with it and with my hon. Friend to deliver on participation.

Music Industry (Copyright)

10. **Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the music industry on copyright term extension. [151104]

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Margaret Hodge): As the Department for Culture, Media and Sport sponsors the creative industries, the music industry has raised the issue of the copyright term for sound recordings most recently in discussions that were held in the context of our creative economy programme. The policy responsibility for copyright issues, however, rests with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Pete Wishart: The Minister will be aware of the profound sense of disappointment in the music industry that musicians alone are not to receive the same type of copyright protection as other artists and creators in the creative economy. It also seems that the economic case for rejecting term extension has been blown out of the water by consultants LEGG, who conclude that term extension would be good not just for musicians, but for the industry and for the economy. I welcome the Minister and her team to the Dispatch Box. Will she do the right thing by UK musicians, look at term extension again and ensure that our musicians get the same protection as other artists and creators?

Margaret Hodge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and look forward in my new role to hearing him play in MP4. On the issue that he raises, the research evidence is extremely mixed. He knows that Gowers undertook a review, and the Europeans have undertaken a review from Hugenholtz. I am told that the Gowers review involved five Nobel prize winners and many well known academics. The important thing for the music industry is to ensure that in the changing environment in which it must survive, there are proper business models which will enable individual performers, composers and all those who are involved in the music industry to get a proper return for their creative investment in that industry. That is what I shall be turning my mind to, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in that exercise.

OLYMPICS

The Minister for the Olympics was asked—

Risk Management

20. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If she will make a statement on the progress of the monitoring and risk management arrangements for the 2012 Olympics. [151114]

The Minister for the Olympics (Tessa Jowell): The Olympics is a risky project, by definition. It is the biggest public sector construction project in Europe and must be completed by the fixed deadline—on Friday, it will be five years to go until the opening ceremony—so risk management is a key part of the arrangements for delivering the 2012 games at every level of its operation. In developing the approaches to risk management, we have built on best practice from previous games—what to do and what not to do—and have looked at best practice in relation to other large projects. Staff are being recruited, particularly from terminal 5, to the delivery authority, the organising committee and the delivery partner.

Tom Brake: I welcome the Minister to her new role. The lack of strong progress monitoring and risk management arrangements identified in the Public Accounts Committee report presents a real risk to good causes which have already been hurt by the diversion of £1.7 billion worth of funding, a figure confirmed by the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office. Can the Minister confirm that any future slippage will be funded from the contingency fund and not by further raids on Olympic legacy projects, such as participation in sports or the arts?

Tessa Jowell: I, too, welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new responsibilities, and suggest that before he makes claims about the National Audit Office report, he reads the report carefully. There is a clear recognition by the NAO report published at the end of last week of the scale of risk involved in the project. That is a statement of fact. Building a project of such a size to a fixed deadline is, by definition, risky. That is why we have put in place the means by which that risk is mitigated. The scale and effectiveness of risk management is one of the many reasons why the president of the International Olympic Committee recently said that we were further ahead in our planning than any other city has ever been.

Stephen Pound (Ealing, North) (Lab): To paraphrase earlier remarks, there has never been a better time to be a sports lover in this country, thanks in no small part to the exemplary work of my right hon. Friend. As we strain our ears towards the sound of the starting pistol in 2012, we must look at infrastructure. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as is the case with any major construction project, the level of risk will reduce as the development of the Olympic park progresses? Will she give an update on progress on the Olympic venues?

Tessa Jowell: Yes, I am delighted to do that for my hon. Friend. Progress has been made on approving the design of the aquatic centre, and companies have been shortlisted to build it. Last week, we announced the design team, which will be led by Hopkins Architects, to build the velopark, which Chris Hoy, one of our gold medallists, has said he expects to be the finest velopark in the world. Planning for the Olympic stadium has moved to the next stage, and the Olympic Delivery Authority has signed a memorandum of understanding with Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd for the development of the stadium. As everyone knows, McAlpine was responsible for, among other great projects, the magnificent new stadium at Arsenal.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I welcome the Minister to her role back at the Dispatch Box, and I also welcome the news about McAlpine. However, is there not a risk management issue? As one newspaper has put it:

"Britain is facing a huge skills shortage that could undermine the success of the Olympics."

We know that we need thousands more electricians, plumbers, bricklayers and many others. What progress is being made to implement the necessary training to ensure that we have sufficient people with the relevant skills, so that we are not later held to ransom by unscrupulous contractors?

Tessa Jowell: The right hon. Gentleman has identified an important point. One aspect of the legacy that we intend for the Olympic games, quite apart from the success in building the games on budget and to time, is to change that part of London, which is characterised by local people as having very low levels of skill and therefore high levels of unemployment. Local people will have skills as a result of the job opportunities created by the Olympics. A large number of initiatives are already under way, led by the Mayor and the Learning and Skills Council, in order to develop the skilled work force that the Olympics will require in every single respect, with a particular emphasis on increasing the skills of people through, for instance, the pre-volunteer programme. That will enable us to achieve two things: first, we will achieve a higher level of skill in east London; secondly, we will ensure that the skill match between people's skills when they look for work and the skills needed by the Olympics means that the Olympic park is constructed to budget and to time.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): The London-Tilbury-Southend line franchise of c2c terminates or is renewable before the Olympics. Will the Minister tell us what she intends to do to ensure that that line receives the appropriate investment to make it welcoming and to maximise mobility in and around the Olympics? What will happen?

Tessa Jowell: I am happy to examine the extent to which that line will serve the Olympic park. The Olympic park and the area around Stratford will benefit from an unprecedented level of investment in new transport infrastructure, with 10 new rail services and other public transport links, including, of course, the channel tunnel rail link, which will be an important part of the infrastructure. Much of that major investment is specifically because of the Olympic games, and I will write to my hon. Friend about the point that he has raised.

Departmental Reorganisation

21. **Mr. Shailesh Vara** (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): How she expects the recent departmental reorganisation to affect the delivery of London 2012; and if she will make a statement. [151115]

Tessa Jowell: As I have said, with five years to go, the Olympic programme now moves into the next phase of delivery. It will require intense ministerial oversight and scrutiny of the building programme, as well as an increased focus to ensure that the resources of the

whole of Government are mobilised and focused on delivering on the five legacy promises that were announced last month. These games are arguably the most ambitious in terms of legacy—a point commented on by the International Olympic Committee, which said that the legacy ambition of the London Olympics would serve as a model for future games. That is why it is important to have a dedicated Minister for the Olympics and why I am delighted to be that Minister.

Mr. Vara: I congratulate the Minister on her new appointment and thank her for her kind reply. A recent Public Accounts Committee report said that it was important that her Department had a plan of

"what needs to be decided, when and by whom."

Does she share the concern of many people that the reorganisation in her Department has blurred the lines of responsibility, and what does she propose to do to allay those fears?

Tessa Jowell: I do not accept the fears that lie behind a perfectly legitimate question. The important thing is to set out clearly the facts and how the divisions of responsibilities will work. I am responsible in Government for the Olympic games. There is a large level of public investment—62 per cent. of the overall provided-for budget will come from the Exchequer—and it is important that that is properly safeguarded. The division of responsibilities is clearly established and was set out last week in a written answer. We have very much followed the precedent of other successful cities in ensuring proper Government engagement at the proper level of ministerial oversight.

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): First, I welcome my right hon. Friend to her renewed responsibility for the Olympics. Whatever the framework within the Department, which rightly has to oversee the project, it is crucial to recognise that she has, in the Olympic Delivery Authority and in the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games, absolutely first-class teams of professionals who are well capable of delivering an exemplary Olympics. Will she ensure that they are allowed to get on with the job so that we are the success that most international commentators believe that we are, and will she not be swayed by the frankly unfocused and sometimes rather outdated criticisms that we hear from the Opposition and from certain quarters in this building?

Tessa Jowell: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is entirely legitimate to question and challenge the progress of the Olympic games, but it would not be right for people to lack confidence in the team in place at the ODA, who are widely recognised as world class. Unlike many of the armchair commentators and more sceptical contributors to the debate, they have built towns and cities, whereas those armchair commentators have probably not even built a garden shed.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent) (Con): I was about to start by welcoming the right hon. Lady back to her old job in the new Ministry. As she is aware, the Olympics enjoy cross-party support, and we wish her well. However, may I take her back to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara)? Could she explain to the House, very simply, why the Government think that it is more efficient to put the budget holders and civil servants in one Department and the Minister in another than to put them all in the same Department together?

Tessa Jowell: We think so for two reasons. First, realisation of legacy is absolutely critical to the wider responsibility of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and secondly, it is one of the aspects of the Olympic bid that defined our programme as being different and more ambitious, whether in relation to the scale of the cultural Olympiad or, as mentioned in earlier exchanges, the sporting legacy.

It is not just a matter, as most countries recognise, of becoming a world-class sporting nation in terms of elite performance, but in terms of participation and of sport in schools. Those arrangements are within the custody and oversight of the DCMS, but there is a further aspect to the legacy ambition that relates to transport and other infrastructure. There are issues relating to security and the use of health services during the games. That dual reach—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must stop the Minister. Thank you.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Comptroller and Auditor General

27. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What progress has been made in developing the new system for overseeing the expenses incurred by the Comptroller and Auditor General in the performance of his duties. [151088]

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The Public Accounts Commission met on 11 July and agreed a system of oversight for expenses incurred by the Comptroller and Auditor General in the discharge of his functions. The new arrangements are set out in the Commission's 13th report.

David Taylor: While I and other Members from the east midlands were on a nightmare journey to Westminster via a Midland Mainline train with standing room only, and King's Cross-St. Pancras station was closed, the head of the National Audit Office was purring from home to work by chauffeur-driven car at the public expense, using a perk that is not even recorded in NAO accounts. Can the feisty Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee get a grip on this flagrant exploitation of the public purse by the Comptroller and Auditor General; otherwise, Sir John really will think that in this Government, there is one born every minute.

Mr. Leigh: I do not think that those remarks do the hon. Gentleman, who is Parliamentarian, or should I say Back Bencher, of the year any credit. The fact is that Sir John Bourn has done an outstanding job in Parliament on behalf of the taxpayer for many years. It

is also important that we preserve the independence of the National Audit Office. The car referred to by the hon. Gentleman is provided by the NAO for its work, and it is used by the Comptroller and Auditor General for that purpose. As he well knows, the Commission, in the light of recent public concern, has put a transparent system in place, by which an external auditor—the chairman of the NAO audit committee—will be briefed in advance on planned expenses. He will discuss them with the Comptroller and Auditor General, and if necessary, with the Chairman of the Commission. These expenses, in turn, can be discussed in public with the Commission. I believe that we have a transparent system.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Stipends

28. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): What the average stipend for clergymen in rural parishes was on 1 July (a) 1997 and (b) 2007; and if he will make a statement. [151089]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Sir Stuart Bell): The average stipend for incumbents in rural and urban parishes alike was £14,510 at 1 July 1997, and is projected to stand at £21,060 at 1 July 2007. By way of a statement, we agree with the hon. Lady's view that parish churches and their congregations are at the heart of rural life. That is why we seek to appoint appropriately remunerated stipendiary priests where possible.

Miss McIntosh: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that answer. Has the average stipend kept up with the cost of living? Moreover, will he take away from this afternoon's exchange that we hold in the highest regard those rural clergymen who are serving a record number of parishes each Sunday? In times of crisis, such as the current flood emergency, and also during the recent BSE disaster, they work beyond the call of duty, which should be recognised.

Sir Stuart Bell: The hon. Lady has often expressed her frustration at the difficulty that rural parishes sometimes have in attracting stipendiary priests. I commend her for continuing to put that point of view, and also for drawing the attention of the House to the work of priests in flood areas.

In response to the hon. Lady's more technical question on the cost of living, I should point out that the national stipends benchmark for 2007-08 is £20,980. This was an increase of 2.5 per cent. on the previous year's benchmark, compared with a projected increase in average earnings of 4.3 per cent. for the year. As the hon. Lady will know, the stipend forms only part of the remuneration package of the parish priest.

Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend believe that there should be a rate for the job in such appointments, and does he have any figures about whether female incumbents receive the same as male incumbents?

Sir Stuart Bell: My hon. Friend may like to know that stipends are fixed each year by the Central Stipends Authority, after careful consideration with dioceses, and the figures reflect what the dioceses can afford. The idea is that stipends should be adequate to enable clergy to discharge their duties without financial anxiety, flexible enough to allow the Church to put clergy where they are best deployed, and equitable to avoid impeding clergy mobility. That applies to male and female clergy.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Gosport, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Fixed-term Parliaments

29. **Mr. Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What recent discussions the Electoral Commission has held on fixed-term Parliaments. [151090]

Peter Viggers (Gosport): The Electoral Commission advises me that it has not held any recent discussions on fixed-term Parliaments.

Mr. Bone: That is rather disappointing. Former Prime Minister Blair promised the electorate in 2005 that if he was re-elected he would serve for a full term. The current Prime Minister has not called a general election, despite that promise. Would it not be appropriate to note that, with a fixed-term Parliament, that sort of political deception could not occur?

Peter Viggers: The Electoral Commission recognises that other elected bodies, including local government, the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly, are elected for fixed terms. However, the commission believes that the question whether fixed terms should be introduced for the House of Commons is a matter for the Government of the day, and, ultimately, Parliament, to decide. It would not be appropriate for me to reply on behalf of the Speaker's Committee to my hon. Friend's specific point.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Many of us believe that the case for a fixed-term Parliament, rather than reliance on the whim of a Prime Minister, is unanswerable, but I doubt very much whether it is a matter for the Electoral Commission rather than the political system. There is, however, a desperate need for the Electoral Commission to be strengthened so that it can perform a much stronger regulatory and monitoring role. Is that transition to a stronger role now well in hand?

Peter Viggers: Yes, there has been change in emphasis in the Electoral Commission, which is reflected in the corporate plan for 2007-08, which was laid before the House of Commons in May 2007. The report stated

"some areas of our work will assume less importance in terms of resource allocation in the future. Rather than taking a lead role in public policy development, we will contribute our expertise and experience to inform new legislation and offer independent evaluation of the Government's own policy initiatives."

Thus there has been an evolution in the role of the commission.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): As the new Prime Minister has indicated that he would not want to go to the country without consulting Parliament—he made that very plain as one of his first utterances in the post—would it be appropriate for the commission to initiate a dialogue on the desirability of fixed terms, as there are many, on both sides of the House, who believe that they are a sensible solution?

Peter Viggers: The Electoral Commission does not believe that that is an appropriate matter for it to become involved in, but I have no doubt that the points made by my hon. Friend will have been heard at the commission, as indeed they will have been heard by the Government.

List Votes (Disregards)

30. **Ian Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps the Electoral Commission is taking to assess the effect on voter turnout of the disregarding of list votes cast for candidates elected in constituencies in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales. [151091]

Peter Viggers: The commission informs me that it is taking no such steps.

Ian Lucas: That is very unfortunate, because when I cast my vote for the Labour party in the north Wales regional list at the National Assembly elections, that vote has no consequence, as it is not counted; it does not result in the meaningful casting of a vote on my part. It is irrelevant for me to take the action of voting, and in my view the commission should look at the issue to decide whether there is a disincentive for individuals to vote. Is not that exactly what the Electoral Commission should look at?

Peter Viggers: The additional Member system was introduced, for the Welsh Assembly elections, the Scottish Parliament elections, and elections to the Greater London Authority, by Parliament at the initiative of the Government in 1999. It includes the D'Hondt system of alternative counting, on which I have made myself an expert in advance of the hon. Gentleman's question, but the commission takes the view that it would not be appropriate for it to make an assessment of the merits of different electoral systems. It believes that that is Parliament's role.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Broadcasts

32. **Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): What the policy of the Church Commissioners is on broadcasts from cathedrals and churches; and if he will make a statement. [151093]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Sir Stuart Bell): The commissioners themselves do not have such a policy. However, by way of a statement, church buildings play a central part in the community and the Church welcomes the wide range of uses to which its buildings are put, as long as they are not contrary to its teaching and do not conflict with its mission.

Mark Pritchard: I understand that the General Synod debated the issue two years ago, but there is no agreed policy on how church buildings, particularly cathedrals, can and should be used for film making and other types of broadcasting. Given the recent controversies about the use of church buildings and places of worship, is it not time that the Synod set down an agreed policy?

Sir Stuart Bell: The Synod has just met and will hold its next meeting later in the year. I shall be happy to put the hon. Gentleman's point to its representatives, but I am sure that he will agree that, whether on television, radio or the internet, regular broadcasts from churches and cathedrals allow a wider audience to keep in touch with one of the treasures of our national life, particularly at times of national joy or grief. Many come together through the broadcast of special services.

Flooding

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the serious flooding that occurred over the weekend.

A band of rain swept across central and southern England on Friday, developing into intense rainstorms. In 24 hours, up to 160 mm or 6½ in of rain fell. With already saturated ground, this water rapidly entered rivers and drainage systems, overwhelming them. Transport was severely disrupted, with the M5 and M50 affected and train services unable to run. Many local roads remain closed and the public are advised not to travel in the worst-hit areas. The most serious flooding has been experienced across central England, particularly in Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire. I must emphasise that the emergency is far from over. Further flooding is very likely, as the Thames and the Severn fill with flood waters from within their catchments. There are currently eight severe flood warnings in place, covering the Severn, the Thames and the Great Ouse in Bedford, while 50 other flood warnings are in place across England and Wales.

We believe that up to 10,000 homes have been or could be flooded. Our thoughts are, of course, with all of those whose lives have been so badly affected by the floods. In addition, up to 150,000 properties in the area including Tewkesbury, Gloucester and Cheltenham have lost, or risk losing, mains water, following the flooding of the Mythe water treatment works at Tewkesbury. This loss of water supply is serious and we do not expect houses to have service restored for some days. Severn Trent, the water company, is making provision for some 900 bowsers to be deployed and refilled by tankers for those people without mains water. The company reports that about 240 bowsers are already in place, and priority is being given to hospitals and vulnerable customers. Precautionary notices to boil water have also been issued in Sutton, Surrey, following rain water getting into treated water storage.

Electricity supply is also a concern. A number of local electricity sub-stations have been affected by flood water, and about 45,000 properties have lost power, including at Castle Mead and Tewkesbury. A major national grid switching station at Walham, Gloucester, remains under threat, which could result in 200,000 or more additional properties losing their supply. That would have a knock-on effect on water supplies. Yesterday evening, armed forces personnel were drafted in to help fire service and Environment Agency staff erect a kilometre-long temporary barrier around the site and start pumping out 18 in of flood water behind the barrier. So far those defences are holding, but the water is still rising, so it is touch and go. If the station does flood, the national grid will be used as far as possible, but properties in the affected area will lose power. Contingency planning is under way to ensure continuity of essential supplies and services.

Last night, the Prime Minister chaired a meeting of COBR, and today he visited Gloucester. Other ministerial colleagues and I have also been to see the problems first hand, in my case visiting Worcester, Evesham and Gloucester yesterday. I am sure that the whole House will wish to thank the emergency services, the armed forces, staff from the Environment Agency, local councils and the utilities, and others for the way in which they have worked together in implementing the emergency plans. I would also like to thank the local communities for their huge effort in helping each other.

Because this emergency continues, I would ask the public to listen out for flood warnings, particularly on local radio stations, to contact the Environment Agency flood line on 0845 9881188, to respond to advice about evacuation and, of course, to look out for neighbours and anyone who might be vulnerable as a result of flooding or the loss of their power and/or water supply. People should not go into flood water and children should certainly not play in it. Even 6 in of fast moving water can knock people off their feet, and the water will often be polluted or hide dangers.

As the waters recede, the clear-up will begin. The revised Bellwin rules will assist local authorities in the areas affected to cover the immediate costs of dealing with the flooding and its aftermath, and the Government will now look at the further support required for these areas. We will also increase funding for flood defences to £800 million by 2010-11, as I informed the House on 2 July.

Finally, the review that I have set up to learn the lessons from the floods of this summer will, of course, look at what has happened over the past three days. I have decided that I will ask an independent person to oversee the review. I will keep the House informed of developments.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and join him in extending our sincere sympathy to the many thousands of people whose homes have been flooded, whose lives have been turned upside down, and whose business premises have been wrecked by the floods. People have had to endure miserable and frightening experiences such as being stuck in their cars overnight, waiting to be rescued from flooded buildings, or camping in temporary accommodation. And, as the Secretary of State said, the problems are not over yet. I also join him in paying tribute to the emergency services, including the Royal Air Force, the fire and ambulance services, local councils and all those who have worked tirelessly in very difficult circumstances to cope with those miserable events.

I have said before that we are not interested in playing a blame game. The extreme weather events that led to the current floods, as well as to those in the north of England last month, are not the Government's fault. They are a humbling reminder of the awesome power of nature. What matters is that everything feasible that could be done to respond to the threat of flooding and to the flooding events themselves was done, is being done and will continue to be done.

Is the Secretary of State satisfied that sufficient action was taken by the relevant bodies following the Met Office's severe weather warning, which was specific to the M4 and M5 corridors in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, last Wednesday? The Met Office deserves to be congratulated on this occasion for being absolutely spot-on, but did timely and helpful information filter

[Mr. Peter Ainsworth]

down to the public in the areas concerned? Chief fire officers have commented on institutional confusion between the numerous agencies involved in dealing with floods. Does the Secretary of State agree that there needs to be a much clearer line of responsibility for flood prevention and tackling emergencies?

Is the Secretary of State aware that, three years ago, the Government undertook to extend the powers of the Environment Agency to include flooding from drains and sewers by the end of 2006? Will he tell us what has happened to that initiative? There are reports that the Environment Agency was unable to install vital flood defences because they were stored too far away from where they were needed and got caught in the general chaos that made the roads impassable. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that was the case? If so, does he regard it as acceptable?

Huge numbers of people are currently without mains access to fresh drinking water and power. Will the Secretary of State tell us what measures are being taken to ensure that vulnerable people are getting a fair share of access to bottled water? Will he comment on reports that Severn Trent has said that it may take a week or even two to restore fresh water supplies in the Tewkesbury area? Surely it must be possible to speed that up.

I am grateful for the Secretary of State's remarks about the efforts to maintain the security of the Walham electricity sub-station. I understand that, were it to fail, it could plunge a further 600,000 or so people into darkness.

Will the Secretary of State clarify who in Government has overall responsibility for dealing with this crisis? There were reports in the press at the weekend that the Prime Minister—it is good to see him in his place this afternoon—had personally taken control of the situation. Will the Secretary of State confirm that?

On 2 July, I welcomed the announcement that spending on flood defences, which was cut last year, was to receive an extra £200 million in 2010-11; but is there not a case for making that extra money available now? Is there any good reason for the delay?

As the Secretary of State knows, I have previously raised the issue of uninsured losses. I accept that it is still too early to make an accurate assessment of the scale of the problem and how it may affect small businesses and people on low incomes. However, one sector likely to be hard hit is farming. Tens of thousands of acres of arable crops such as wheat have been destroyed and crops like potatoes are rotting in the fields. What consideration has the right hon. Gentleman given to the financial losses to the farming sector and to their implications. I am pleased that the inquiry will be led by an independent person and I look forward to hearing more about it.

Looking ahead, all the scientific evidence suggests that severe weather events are likely to continue increasing in frequency and ferocity. That is consistent with climate change.

Will the Secretary of State hold urgent discussions with the Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government and for Transport about the priority accorded by local authorities and the highways agencies towards the mundane but essential work of properly maintaining drains and culverts?

While the right hon. Gentleman is talking to the Communities Secretary, will he raise the possibility of extending the Bellwin scheme to cover capital spending programmes arising from flood damage? Local authorities are understandably very anxious to obtain reassurance from the Government that the medium and long-term costs of reconstruction and repair will not fall only on their local residents. He might also point out to the Communities Secretary that although there is broad agreement that more affordable homes are needed, nobody will thank the Government for building homes that are subject to flooding and are uninsurable—least of all the people who move into them.

Finally, all our thoughts are currently concentrated on relieving the plight of the victims of these dreadful floods and on preventing further disasters as the tide of water moves westward. We want to offer our support to the efforts of the Government and their agencies to deal with the imminent dangers, just as our local councils are working in close partnership with them on the ground. However, the Secretary of State will know that, once the waters recede and people begin the long process of rebuilding their lives, many searching and awkward questions about the adequacy of the systems in place in this country to deal with emergencies will remain to be answered.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman both for his appreciation of the efforts made in response to this emergency and for the spirit in which he made his remarks. I would like to pick up the points that he raised.

First, yes, the Met Office warning was pretty clear, but as the Gold Commander told me yesterday morning in Worcester, we do not know precisely which river catchment systems the rain will fall into until it actually happens. That certainly applied in respect of the M5 and the M50. We should bear it in mind that these are relatively new motorways, built to try and accommodate the removal of surface water. That shows one of the lessons that we have to reflect on as we design such roads in the future.

The hon. Gentleman referred to institutional confusion, but I have to say that in all my discussions, including at meetings that I have chaired and talks with the Gold Commanders in Worcester and Gloucester, I have not found any institutional confusion at all. The system in place is the Gold Command system, which has complete oversight of what is required in the areas covered. The emergency response has included the evacuation of people, bringing supplies in and providing help and support—such as offering shelter even for some motorists who found themselves trapped because they could not travel on Friday evening. All of that happened precisely because of the arrangements that have been put in place.

On the two barriers, it is the case that temporary barriers for Upton upon Severn and Worcester could not be deployed because of traffic congestion. In the case of the Upton upon Severn barrier, I am advised by the Environment Agency that even if it had been deployed, it would have been over-topped because of the weight of the water. In the case of Worcester, it would have protected about 30 homes. I accept that one

of the lessons that needs to be learned is that if there are temporary barriers, they ought to be stored in a place that will enable them to be put up quickly. I will take that thought away with me.

The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point on the availability of water supplies. Local authorities, together with the water company and, indeed, the general public, all have a part to play in ensuring that everybody who requires water will have it made available to them. On the Mythe water treatment works, I have asked the very question that the hon. Gentleman put to me of the chief executive of the Severn Trent company when I spoke to him late yesterday evening. I have said that we will give any assistance that he requires to get access to the Mythe water treatment plant once the water level falls so that the work of repairing it can happen.

On the Environment Agency, there has been, as the hon. Gentleman knows because we discussed this last time, no cut to the capital budget. Some feasibility studies were held back for a bit because of the reduction in the budget, but that has been made up this year. It has had no effect at all on the response to the flooding over the past month. The additional funding that I announced to the House will come on stream. The precise details will be announced once the comprehensive spending comes out. It will have to take account of the fact that as those feasibility studies come in place, there will be a programme of capital works that the Environment Agency itself will want to fund.

I am acutely conscious of the distress caused not only to members of the public because of what has happened to their houses and businesses, but to farmers. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the steps that I have already taken to lift the restriction on accessing water-logged land, which applies until the end of this month—I will review it in light of the current weather conditions—and to enable farmers to ask for access to set-aside land for grazing or foraging in the light of the damage caused to their crops, although many of them are still under water.

As for looking ahead, the whole question of surface water drainage is a big one. The truth is that we are dealing with a system that has been in place for more than 150 years, and the surface water drainage system was not designed to cope with the unprecedented rainfall that we have been seeing. The most important lesson we can learn is that as we build from now on in we ensure that drainage can accommodate the flow of water that we currently see.

As for the Bellwin rules, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that they were extended in response to the flooding that took place at the end of June. Those extensions were applied by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on Saturday to the local authorities affected. Capital work—repairs to possible damage to bridges and other structures—will be a matter for the individual Departments that are responsible for agreeing capital funding and approvals to discuss with the relevant local authorities.

Finally, a lot of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised and the questions that I and others have got about what can be done better in future will be picked up by the review. I am grateful to him for welcoming the fact that an independent person will oversee it.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): We also wish to express our sympathy to all of those affected by the floods. They are severe and there has been an enormous amount of hardship caused for many, many people. We also wish to join in the congratulations offered to the emergency services and, indeed, to join in the pride that the House should rightly feel in their dedication and devotion to duty.

An independent review of the lessons to be learned from these events is surely welcome. Will the Secretary of State also confirm that he intends to proceed with the strategic overview for the Environment Agency of all flood risks, which the Government announced in March 2005? There is a confusion between what has been a good set of co-ordinated responses through Gold Command by the emergency services and the much less clear response of the agencies responsible for the prevention, forecasting and warning of flooding. After all, that commitment in March 2005 was before the revolving ministerial door in the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs took its toll. Ministers should now proceed with this.

Is it not crazy that the responsibility for preventing floods and for protecting us against flooding remains split between councils, water companies, the Highways Agency and the Environment Agency, all of which operate on different assessments of risk? Perhaps the Secretary of State will clarify that point.

Drainage is assessed as adequate when it deals with one-in-10-years events; river flood defences are expected to be proof against one-in-100-years events. When will the Department insist that those be brought into line, while, we hope, clearly taking account of what is happening because of climate change? When will the Department ensure that there is a proper map of drainage and sewerage systems that are poorly maintained or otherwise inadequate?

It is already clear that official assessments of river flooding are now woefully behind reality. For example, the new £23 million flood defence on the River Chelt at Cheltenham was meant to be proof against events once in every hundred years, yet it has been over-topped not once but twice in three weeks. On that reckoning, either the Environment Agency has to redo its sums or Cheltenham need not expect another flood for 200 years. Will the Secretary of State now review all existing provisions and future ones as, clearly, the greater likelihood of flooding means that many more schemes will pass the Government's investment threshold?

The Prime Minister, whom I am delighted to see in his place, has to take particular responsibility for the Government's flood failures, as he was the person who cut the flood defence budget by £14 million last summer. There is no point in saying that the capital budget was not affected; those are weasel words. The truth is that the overall flood defence budget was cut and effecting feasibility studies meant that capital projects are likely to be delayed. If he doubts that, I suggest he talks to some of the people involved with the flood board in Yorkshire and Humberside.

The local flood boards were asked only last month to plan for real-terms cuts for the next three years. Even after the Yorkshire floods, the Treasury conceded only that the flood defence budget should be boosted in

[Chris Huhne]

2010—as the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said—while saying nothing about the next two years of the spending plans.

I heard the Secretary of State say that we should wait for the comprehensive spending review, but surely the urgency of the situation demands that we get some clarity about the Government's intentions earlier than that. Is it not time that the Government recognised the urgency of the threat posed by climate change?

Hilary Benn: On the last point, the Government certainly realise the scale of the threat from climate change. One cannot attribute a particular incident to climate change, but it is clear that the climate is changing and that human activity is causing that. We are likely, the scientists tell us, to see extreme weather events with greater frequency. We are talking about a huge excess of water here; in other parts of the world, there are droughts. That is the future with which the whole world must deal.

On the strategic overview, I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees that the sensible course of action is to reflect on that in light of the review that will be undertaken, which will need to look at a number of the points that he raised, of which I am aware. On the different bodies that are responsible for drainage systems, it is surely right and proper that each body that maintains the asset should have the responsibility of ensuring that it is in an appropriate condition. We must ensure that we look at how all the different pieces connect because surface water drainage may be the responsibility of the Highways Agency, the local authority or some private landowner. We will have to reflect on that as part of the review.

On the over-topping of the defences, even the best defences have been over-topped. As we speak, the new defences at Gloucester Quay, built some years ago, are about 4 in away from being over-topped. Everyone is waiting anxiously to see whether the peak will be reached without breaching that defence or not, but that is the result of investment that has already been made. There are new defences at Kidderminster, Newport Pagnell and Towcester and the new Jubilee river has been brought into play. It is, in effect, a flood relief bypass for Maidenhead in particular. It has not stopped all flooding in Maidenhead, but it has resulted in some pressure being taken off the Thames.

On the flood defence budget, I simply say that it was £300 million a year about a decade ago, that it has risen to £600 million and that it will rise further to £800 million. Le me also repeat that what happened to last year's Environment Agency budget has not affected the capacity of the EA or the defences to deal with the current flooding. The money was restored and, as I told the House two weeks ago, we will significantly increase it. We need to do that because of the weather that we now have to deal with.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I am mindful that many Members wish to contribute, but I am also aware that there are two further statements to follow and the main business of the House. I therefore request that Members ask only one supplementary question. If they are also answered briefly, more Members will be able to ask questions.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I first thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for visiting Gloucestershire? I also pay due regard to the emergency services, and to my neighbours in Gloucester, Tewkesbury and Cheltenham who have obviously suffered more than I have in Stroud—although my visits over the weekend to properties made it clear to me that the situation in general is miserable.

On local co-ordination, it is a nice idea that we can rely on amateurs to open sluice gates and people to take seriously their riparian ownership, but it takes only one failure for the entire system to go wrong. I ask my right hon. Friend to look into that matter, and the operation of inland drainage boards. We could learn lessons from such investigations, and improve the effective, speedy, local action that is required in circumstances such as those we face.

Hilary Benn: I am very happy to be able to say to my hon. Friend that that is one of the issues that the review will look into.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Although the Prime Minister has just left the Chamber, I wish to thank him for visiting the affected area this morning and to say that I entirely agree with his conclusion that we need to update the infrastructure. We also need to stop building houses on or near floodplains and to ensure that drains are clear and that emergency measures can be undertaken rather more quickly than they were on this occasion.

Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the people of Tewkesbury for showing great strength during this terrible time? My constituency has been absolutely devastated. Only yesterday I personally helped people in wheelchairs leave their flooded flats—some properties might not have been given the right priority. Questions on such matters are perhaps for the future, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the most pressing task is to ensure that there is no loss of life and no injuries, and will he make sure that agencies have all the resources they need?

Hilary Benn: I certainly join in the hon. Gentleman's thanks to all his constituents for their efforts and his expressions of sympathy to all who have been so badly affected. I know that this is a difficult time. From the beginning of the crisis, I have said to everyone I have met who is in charge of the emergency response that they should let us know of any further resources that they might need. I also ask the hon. Gentleman and all other Members—I met some on Saturday evening—to contact me about all relevant circumstances or events in their constituency because I want to make sure that every support is given.

In terms of floodplains, there will be an announcement on housing development to follow, but let me say that we strengthened in 2001 and then again, and more significantly, in 2006 the advice on that through the planning policy statement. It is clear that local authorities must now take into account flood risk in taking decisions

on planning applications and the EA now has a statutory right to be consulted—it is the expert on flood risk and it will express its view.

Mr. Andrew Smith (Oxford, East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. The situation in Oxfordshire is very serious, and in Oxford it threatens to get worse as the Thames rises. Will he take note that the message I received from elderly evacuees at the Oxford United stadium reception centre, and from others I spoke to on my visit, is that the emergency response in Oxfordshire has been very effectively co-ordinated by the county's emergency planning officer, the statutory agencies and volunteers, and moreover that the steps being taken are reassuring people who are desperately worried?

My right hon. Friend mentioned a review. I welcome the fact that it will be independent. Will he give the House some idea of the time scale it will work to, as it is important that the right lessons are learned?

Hilary Benn: I am glad to hear that from my right hon. Friend's perspective the emergency response has been so effective. That does show the benefits of the planning that has been put in place and the structures that are operational. I hope that an initial report from the review will be available by the end of the year. The emergency phase comes first, and then looking at some of the longer term lessons from the clean-up. It is important, however, that we have a first look as quickly as possible, and that is what I will ask the independent person to do.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire) (Con): What is the point of having flood defences that are not used when they are most needed? That was certainly the case at Upton upon Severn, despite what the Secretary of State says—and much to the distress of my constituents who are still stranded there now. Will he ensure that the Upton mistakes are part of the remit of the independent review that he has announced?

Hilary Benn: As I have already said to the hon. Gentleman, the Environment Agency very much regrets that in those two cases it was not able to get the temporary barriers through, although—as he heard me say a moment ago—even if they had been erected, the advice I have had from the agency is that it would not have made any difference, because they would have been over-topped in any case. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point: if there are temporary barriers, it is important that they are capable of being put up. I undertake that we will look at the situation to ensure that that does not happen again.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): When natural disasters of the severity that we have witnessed over the past few weeks occur in other parts of the world, the British public are extraordinarily generous in their offers of help. Can my right hon. Friend say if he is aware of arrangements to receive and harness offers of help from the British public, and will he give some consideration as to how the Government can encourage and support individuals and organisations to offer money, time and even temporary accommodation to people at this difficult time, in addition to whatever insurers and the Government are doing?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the natural human response when other human beings are in trouble, which is to extend a helping hand. In the case of the flooding that we saw in Yorkshire and Humberside, several funds were established to provide support to those who lost everything. It is early days in the present case, but I am sure that local communities will want to take the same sort of initiative to provide support to people who have lost a great deal. We would encourage them to do so.

As for physical assistance, one of the benefits of the planning that has been put in place is the way in which emergency services from other parts of the country have come in. I talked to fire crews and other crews, and the system works well, especially for boat rescue. One of the most impressive things that I saw yesterday was at the new fire control centre in Worcester, which is co-ordinating the boat rescue facilities from around the country, including the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and other fire and rescue services, to deploy them where needed to bring succour and support to people who have suffered so much.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his visit yesterday to my constituents in Evesham, a town that has had its second dramatic flooding event in only nine years, and for enabling me to join him in his visit to Gold Command at Hindlip hall in Worcestershire. We were able to discuss issues of mutual concern and to congratulate the emergency services on the remarkable job that they have done in Worcestershire. I join him in saying that the co-ordination in the county was outstanding. However, the rain of course fell on the boundary of two if not three Government regions, and we also heard concern expressed about a problem with cross-regional co-operation. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the independent review will take proper account of the cross-regional issues, which could make a big difference to future flooding events?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and for the time that he spent yesterday morning, in addition to all the work that he and many other right hon. and hon. Members have done to support their constituents. He raises an important point, and, as part of the process, some of the new national arrangements have come into place. However, we need to ensure that if an emergency falls in an area that does not fit neatly in Government office regions or the Gold Command structures, the right people meet together to make things happen. That is another lesson that we need to learn.

Anne Snelgrove (South Swindon) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend take into account the experience of the residents of Moresby close in Swindon, whose homes first flooded in 2004? Ever since my election, I have been working with them to try to get Thames Water, the local council and the Environment Agency to work together to find a solution to the problem of the culvert that frequently floods their houses. Together, we helplessly watched sewage bubble up through the drains and lap at their garages on Friday. It was not pleasant, and solving this problem has taken too long. Can my right hon. Friend ensure that the independent review makes the agencies work together faster?

Hilary Benn: I cannot promise that the independent review will look at each individual case of flooding risk in that way, but as I indicated in answer to an earlier question, it will look at the broader point of ensuring that there is a co-ordinated overview of what the different agencies need to do.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): On 16 September 2004, as the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), will recall, the Select Committee requested a White Paper from the Government giving details of how they would deal with the type of extreme event and flooding that we have now experienced. In the light of the non-appearance of that White Paper, may I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that when the independent review reports and the Government make their response, that response has the status of a White Paper?

Hilary Benn: I will reflect on the point that the right hon. Gentleman raises. What I am most interested in, and what I know that he is most interested in, is ensuring that the lessons, once learned, are applied so that we can deal even more effectively with such emergencies in future. Certainly, the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 has helped to put in place arrangements that several hon. Members have said are working quite well, and we have to ensure that we get on and make the right things happen once we know what we can do better in future.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): My constituency is about to be flooded for the second time in four days. On Friday there were serious problems with surface water flooding, as the drainage culverts simply lacked the capacity to cope with the increased volumes of water. Tonight, the Thames in Berkshire will burst its banks, causing misery for hundreds of families. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the drainage systems are upgraded to increase capacity and that more money is spent on flood defences where they can make a difference?

Hilary Benn: As my hon. Friend will have heard, we certainly will be spending more money on flood defence. Let me also say that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), is going to visit Reading tomorrow. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) raises an important point about surface water. In part, the problem is a consequence of the fact that more land has been tarmacked over and paved over, so there is nowhere for the water to go when there is flash flooding. That is a lesson that all those with responsibility for surface drainage have to take on board.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): May I also congratulate the emergency services and everyone from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Gold Command and even BBC Radio Gloucestershire for their contribution to making the crisis in Gloucestershire less serious than it would have been? I also thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for the personal interest that they have shown. However, may I ask the Secretary of State to ask the Environment Agency to extend its inquiry to the June floods in Cheltenham? May I also ask him to include in his own review some examination of why so much damage was done in Cheltenham in areas of relatively high ground close to culverts and drains? In one case, a stream that was normally a few inches deep rose 15 ft and inundated nearby homes.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his words, and for his thanks. I will ask the Environment Agency, in reflecting on those lessons, to respond both to me and to him.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): In Sheffield we had our floods three weeks ago, and one of the sites that I visited at the invitation of National Grid was the Neepsend transformer station, which was flooded, leaving several thousands of homes without electricity on a rotational basis. Furthermore, if the Ulley dam had burst its banks, the Brinsworth transformer station could have gone down, which would have left whole sections of Sheffield and Rotherham without electricity for several days. Could I have an assurance that the Secretary of State will ask the review to look at the vulnerability of our electricity supply system and the lack of back-up when a transformer system goes down?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. One thing that is very clear as a result of these recent events is just how vulnerable is the ecosystem of utility services—if I may use that phrase. One bit goes out, and there is a knock-on consequence: the power goes, and it is not possible to pump the water. By definition, water treatment plants need to be by a river because that is where they get the water from. The Mythe plant has not flooded before, as far as I am aware—I asked the chief executive about that last night. The plant is raised on the side of the river, but, even there it was overwhelmed. Looking at what arrangements are in place in future to ensure that utilities can be protected from this kind of event will be an important part of the review.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): In the cost-benefit analysis of flood defence work, one of the crucial factors is, quite rightly, the probability of a flood taking place. In my constituency we have had two "one-in-30-years" floods in the past nine years, and that is common, certainly in the west midlands. I wonder whether the Secretary of State can assure us that in his review, that formula will be reconsidered, because projects that did not look viable on a one-in-30-years basis may well have a very considerable positive value on a one-in-10-years basis.

Hilary Benn: I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that I should be very content to ask the review to look at that very question.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): May I look ahead some hours and days, and ask what is the prognosis for managing the build-up of water in the Thames as it comes through areas such as Runnymede, Spelthorne and Elmbridge, hits Teddington and goes beyond that into the tidal area of the Thames, past this building and into my own area on the Thames estuary? Can we have some reassurance that those waters can

and will be managed, and if not, what is being done to alert the various authorities, both in the non-tidal Thames and in my area of Essex and opposite in Kent?

Hilary Benn: Clearly, those managing the watercourses, the river and the defences in place will do their best to ensure that flooding is minimised. Clearly, the existence of the Thames barrier, which protects a large part of London which is, of course, built on a floodplain, will also help. Below the Thames barrier things are more difficult. Further up, one of the things that the Thames barrier could do is to close up to allow some further relief for the water to pass down the system, to try to take the pressure off the Thames in its upper reaches.

Bill Wiggin (Leominster) (Con): In Herefordshire, particularly, and in Worcestershire, these summer floods are the worst in living memory. My own car was flooded, and I had to carry my daughter to safety on my shoulders through chest-deep water. The Secretary of State asks for suggestions about what could be done. The people of Tenbury Wells in my constituency have been flooded three times, twice in the past week. I do not know what the answer is for them, but I do know that he can look again at his plans for the single farm payment, because the fields that are flooded were full of crops, and if he could get at least 80 per cent: to the farming community before Christmas, he would have a tremendous impact on what is going to happen to the rural community.

Hilary Benn: I understand. I am sorry to hear about the personal circumstances that the hon. Gentleman, like many members of the public, found himself in. With the single farm payment, because of what has happened in the past, as he will be aware, what I am most anxious to do is to ensure that the targets that we have set are met. The worst thing would be to set targets that might not be achieved. But I have said that in the autumn, as we see what further progress is being made by the Rural Payments Agency, we will look into whether further targets can be set, but I do not want to do that until I can review the situation.

May I take this opportunity, since I know how many Members, particularly Opposition Members, have been affected, to express my thanks to the right hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) for the very considerable assistance that was given over the weekend to enable myself and my ministerial colleagues to contact right hon. and hon. Members?

Jim Dobbin (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency is not a floodplain, but it has recently experienced two very serious flash-flooding episodes. My right hon. Friend has said that existing drainage systems will be looked at. Will he also insist that those undertaking the review plead with local authority planning departments to regulate properly new developments that link into the existing drainage systems, and please ask them to clean their grids more regularly?

Hilary Benn: The whole House would agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes, particularly the last one: it is important that drainage systems be properly maintained, because they can become blocked, which affects the flow of water. First, it certainly is the responsibility of local authorities to ensure that when they give permission for new developments, the flood risk is assessed, as I have already described to the House. Secondly, it is clear that in future all local authorities will have to think about whether the current design standards for surface water drainage are adequate.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Secretary of State referred to the "precautionary boil" notices that have been issued in my constituency. The incident that he referred to took place on Friday, as a result of the flooding of the Cheam treatment plant, and it took 24 hours before a decision was made to issue that "precautionary boil" notice, and a further 24 hours before the message was fully and finally received by all my constituents. Will his review look carefully and closely at what can be done to speed up the decision-making process, not least because by the time that the message finally went out to my constituents, most of the water that could have been contaminated would already have been drunk?

Hilary Benn: Without waiting for the review, I undertake to go away and ask precisely the question the hon. Gentleman has put to me about why there was a passage of time before the information was made available to members of the public. I shall respond to him directly.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look at why several recent developments of homes in my constituency have been flooded, and will he ask why the Environment Agency did not insist on more adequate drainage and ditches when the developments were being put in place, to protect new owners from that terrible shock?

Hilary Benn: As the right hon. Gentleman will have heard in answer to an earlier question, we have now given the Environment Agency a much stronger position in the process by requiring it to be statutorily consulted when new planning applications come in. We have tightened the planning guidance—both in 2001 and in 2006—by further strengthening it to make it clear to local authorities that in the end, the planning authority has the responsibility for ensuring that it has weighed up all the risks before deciding to give planning permission.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): I am sure that the whole House would like to pay tribute and give thanks to the armed forces, which yet again, at very short notice, have come to the assistance of the civil authorities in an emergency. Sadly, there are far fewer members of the armed forces—both Regular and Territorial—than there were 10 years ago, as a direct result of the policies of the Government and the Prime Minister in cutting the defence budget. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what the units deployed on Friday and Saturday were doing beforehand? Were they on leave—either weekend leave, or leave following a tour in Iraq or Afghanistan? How many were in training for those deadly war zones, to which they may be going soon?

Hilary Benn: I do not have the information in relation to the forces, but the hon. Gentleman will have seen, as I did, the pictures of the RAF helicopters

[Hilary Benn]

lifting people to safety—and Army personnel were heavily involved in the rescue operation at the Walham national grid switching station. I will endeavour to find out the information and provide it to him. I join him in paying tribute to the astonishing professionalism, bravery and skill of our armed forces.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): My constituency, too, has been hit hard by the floods. Will the Secretary of State ask the independent review to look into whether it is possible to give the Environment Agency a power of veto over proposed developments on the floodplain?

Hilary Benn: Although the review is going to look into many things—some of which we have added in the course of these questions—I do not think that the whole future of our planning policy ought to be part of that. It should be recognised that we have already given the Environment Agency a strong position in the process, and that ultimately, the Secretary of State has the power to call in proposals, having regard to the advice that the Environment Agency gives.

Mr. Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Some unfortunate households in the Ludlow constituency have been flooded twice, and a small number three times, in the past month. The Secretary of State talked about the Bellwin formula being extended from two to six months, which is welcome. I want to ask him about some significant pieces of public infrastructure, such as the bridge at Ludlow, which has had its span doubled in width as a result of the flow of water. That is going to involve a significant engineering redesign, not just a simple repair, and the current estimate for completion is 12 months. That falls outside the six months. Can he confirm to the House today that it will be covered?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but engineering and bridge works, of whatever nature, fall outwith the Bellwin rules, because those rules cover the immediate emergency clear-up costs. We have extended the time in which local authorities can make claims, because we recognise that the clear-up itself may take quite some time. The issue that he raised would be picked up in the normal discussions between the relevant department and the local authority. If it is a road that the Highways Agency has an interest in—*[Interruption.]* It is not. Well, it would need to be picked up by the existing systems.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) (Con): Ahead of the main review, will the Secretary of State undertake to sit down with the farming community and others to look at the possibility of relatively short-term improvements in our water storage capacity—involving, for example, balancing ponds, storage reservoirs and even possibly the planned, as opposed to the recent catastrophic, reversion of arable land to floodplain grassland?

Hilary Benn: I would be happy to meet representatives of the farming community to discuss those issues, because I am acutely conscious of the difficulties that farmers will face, which have already been raised. The farming community can make a contribution, as we recognise that one of the places where water can go is away from built-up areas, but that can have knock-on consequences on crops that have been planted.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): In the second world war people were evacuated from Birmingham to south Worcester and Gloucestershire. We now face a situation in which things may get substantially worse and people may lose access to electricity and water. Emergency planning in Birmingham has considered whether we can evacuate people from Gloucestershire to Birmingham, and we are willing to help. The health of some people may depend on their having access to water and mains electricity. Will the Secretary of State ensure that there is contingency planning, so that if it is likely that people will lose access to water and electricity, they are evacuated to where it is safe, whether that is Birmingham, Bristol or elsewhere—somewhere where they can access clean water and electricity to maintain their health?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because he draws attention to the willingness of authorities that have not been affected, and the people who work for them, to extend a helping hand. Contingency planning is already taking place, but I hope that it will not come to that, and that the Walham electricity plant can be protected. However, those with responsibility for managing this emergency are looking at what may need to be done if the worst happens.

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the Walham national grid switching station, and I support what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) said. Recent events have highlighted the critical needs of our infrastructure with regard to both electricity and water, and the fact that we are vulnerable at certain pinchpoints. We are not vulnerable to weather-related events alone; I am sure that the criticality of our infrastructure needs cannot have escaped the attentions of those who would do us harm. It is probably outside the scope of the independent review, but the Government should review our national infrastructure as a matter of urgency, to establish how vulnerable we are to all sorts of threats, as this event has highlighted may be the case.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman is right, and that is why the utility companies are part of the resilience forum structure. But, yes, we need to consider what more can be done to protect crucial parts of our infrastructure from rain, water and flooding.

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State's independent review assess the impact of infill development on our communities? Most of the flooding in my constituency was caused not by rivers overflowing but by the impact of water skating off the roofs and tarmac of houses built inside the façade of Edwardian and Victorian housing, whose drainage is not simply good enough to cope.

Hilary Benn: Yes, it will.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Two detailed points arise from the experience in Wootton Bassett in my constituency, where homes were flooded in Westbury Park. Wiltshire was badly affected, although not quite as badly as Gloucestershire. My first question is about the planning permission that has already been granted for building not only on floodplains but on the flood

reservoir in Wootton Bassett. That would be a catastrophe if it went ahead. How on earth can we reverse outline planning permission that has already been given? Secondly, one of the bodies—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has already asked one question.

Hilary Benn: I am not aware of the precise details of the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised, but perhaps he would like to write to me with further details—although the matter probably falls within the responsibilities of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: people who give planning permission in future should reflect on the consequences of what they have given permission for.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Environment Agency offices for the whole of the Thames basin are based in Swift house in Frimley, in my constituency. I wrote to the Secretary of State's predecessor in April to point out that following cuts to his Department's budget, seven staff members had been let go in the previous 12 months. Many of my constituents who have been flooded out of their homes for the second time in a year will be asking why, at a time of acute climate change, the Environment Agency is laying off experts in flood management and defence.

Hilary Benn: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is advancing the argument that the events that he mentions have had an effect on the Environment Agency's capacity to respond to the current emergency. Like all parts of Government, the Environment Agency is having to look at using its resources as efficiently as possible. I seem to recollect that when the James review was published, it suggested considerable reductions in funding for the Environment Agency.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): Further to the answer that the Secretary of State has just given my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), there is significant concern that adequate resources might not be given to the Environment Agency when it has the new duties of scrutiny of planning, The run-off that was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) needs detailed consideration in the planning system, not a nod through. Will commensurate resources and staffing be given to the Environment Agency to allow detailed scrutiny of planning in flood-prone areas?

Hilary Benn: I know from my discussions with Sir John Harman and Barbara Young of the Environment Agency how seriously they take the responsibility that they now have to comment on those planning applications under the new powers that we have given them, and am I sure—not least in the light of what we have experienced in the past month—that that is exactly what they will do.

Housing

4.25 pm

The Minister for Housing (Yvette Cooper): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about housing supply. May I start by supporting the statement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and joining the many Members of the House who have expressed their sympathy to the thousands of families whose lives have been turned upside down by the unprecedented flooding affecting wide parts of the country.

The Government are today publishing a housing Green Paper on affordable housing supply, setting out proposals to deliver the homes that Britain urgently needs today and for the future. The House should be proud of the huge steps forward that this country has taken in improving housing since 1997. There has been a two-thirds cut in rough sleeping, a £20 billion investment in social housing that has helped lift over a million children out of cold, poor or damp conditions, and economic stability that has given over a million more people the opportunity to become homeowners—but we also need to respond to new challenges.

Demand for homes to buy or to rent is growing faster than supply, and homes are becoming less affordable as a result. Already many first-time buyers rely on the help of friends or family to get a foot on the ladder. It simply is not fair that their chance of owning their own home should depend so much on whether their parents or grandparents were homeowners before them. It is also not fair that children are still growing up in overcrowded or temporary accommodation, waiting for a settled home. Without further action, housing could become one of the greatest sources of social inequality in the next 20 years.

In addition, we need to respond to the challenge of climate change. Our homes account for more than a quarter of national carbon emissions. We must provide greener, better designed housing for the future. As recent events have highlighted, it is vital to take steps to protect all our communities from flooding, and from the consequences of climate change in the future.

In the face of these challenges, we propose strong action. First, we will build more homes to meet growing demand. The level of house building is at its highest for 17 years, but it is not enough. Moreover, without firm action there is no guarantee that growth will continue, as short-term market pressures mean that some developers have slowed starts this year. We believe that a total of 3 million new homes are needed by 2020, and we need to deliver 2 million of those by 2016. This must include new homes in the north as well as the south, as every region is seeing demand outstrip supply. In parts of the north we need additional affordable homes alongside areas of housing market renewal.

Already locations for 1.6 million homes are identified in current regional plans, with up to a further 200,000 emerging in the new regional spatial strategies and in future revisions to them. This includes 650,000 homes in the growth areas such as the Thames Gateway and Milton Keynes. In addition, 45 towns and cities have already come forward with proposals for additional homes over the next 10 years in new growth points.

[Yvette Cooper]

Today we are inviting more councils to come forward to be new growth points, including, for the first time, councils in the north of England. We are also inviting bids for councils and developers to come forward with proposals for at least five new eco-towns.

No one should be in any doubt about the historic scale of this vision. We are proposing the first new towns in 40 years, but with substantial improvements in environmental standards across the board. Further changes are needed to support the delivery of these homes. Providing enough land is vital, and councils need to identify 15 years' supply of appropriate land for housing, with continuing priority for sustainable brownfield land. We will not change the rules on strong greenbelt protection.

We will introduce additional funding and incentives for councils and communities that are showing a lead in delivering growth through a new housing and planning delivery grant, a new £300 million community infrastructure fund and additional funding dedicated to high-growth areas.

We are consulting on proposals to deter developers from seeking planning permission and then sitting on land without bringing forward new homes. We will also work across the Government to bring forward more brownfield land. I can announce that the Ministry of Defence has agreed to bring forward six sites with the potential for 7,000 homes, including sites at Aldershot and Chichester. The Department for Transport has also identified hundreds of potential sites for new homes.

We will support local councils in setting up new local housing companies with partners to use their own land to build more homes. I can announce that 14 councils have already come forward to support that scheme. They estimate that in their areas alone they have the potential to deliver 35,000 homes on their land, with at least 17,500 of those homes being affordable homes. Better use also needs to be made of empty homes, including those left empty long-term by investors and speculators. Councils already have powers to take action, and we will look at the potential for additional incentives for them to do so.

Secondly, although building more homes is crucial, they must also be better homes and more sustainable homes. In the 1960s, quality was sacrificed in the name of speed, and we must not make that mistake again. Today, our new homes must be part of well-designed and mixed communities with excellent local facilities, which means more family homes as well as parks and green spaces. With the urgent challenge of climate change, they must be greener homes built to the highest environmental standards.

I confirm today that from 2016 all new homes will need to be zero carbon. We are the first country to set such an ambitious timetable, and I welcome the support of councils, green groups and developers across the country who have committed to working with us to make that happen.

As well as helping to prevent climate change, we need to ensure that our homes are resilient to its consequences. Over centuries, many homes have been built in high-risk flood areas, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has set out immediate action to support the families suffering dreadfully from the extreme weather.

Since 1997, we have progressively strengthened the rules on planning to protect homes from flooding, with much higher standards brought in last year. The new rules require councils to consult the Environment Agency, and where the Environment Agency says that the risk is too high and councils persist against that advice, we in government will be prepared to take over those decisions ourselves. We will also look further at what needs to be done to be ready for future challenges. Later this year, we will publish a new planning policy statement, which will require councils to plan more widely for the consequences of climate change.

Thirdly, we believe that a decent home should be for the many and not only for the few. I can announce that we will invest £8 billion in increasing affordable housing over the next three years, a £3 billion increase compared with the previous spending review. That is on top of continuing investment in decent homes, including more than £2 billion on the arm's length management organisation programme over the next three years.

We have listened to the evidence from Shelter and the National Housing Federation, which says that we need 70,000 affordable homes a year, of which 50,000 should be new social housing. I can announce that by 2010-11 we will deliver more than 70,000 new affordable homes a year. By 2010-11, we will deliver 45,000 new social homes a year with a goal of 50,000 homes in the next spending review. That is a 50 per cent. increase in new social housing over a three-year period, and it will more than double the amount of social housing in a six-year period. We will also deliver 25,000 new shared ownership homes through expanding existing programmes. In addition, we will look to support tens of thousands of additional shared ownership homes through public sector land and local housing companies, and we will set out further details later in the year.

As rural areas face particular pressures, we will set a specific target for increasing affordable homes in rural areas later this year after consultation with the regional assemblies. We want to see more work by local councils, housing associations and the private sector to increase affordable housing both to buy and to rent. We are announcing today the first 10 arm's length management organisations—ALMOs—and local authority special venture vehicles approved to bid for social housing grant in order to build council homes. We are also consulting on changes to the rules on the treatment of rents and receipts from new homes, which would give councils more flexibility to build on their land, within responsible public finance rules.

We also believe that first-time buyers need more flexible and competitive products. The Treasury is consulting on new ways to support more affordable long-term fixed-rate mortgages. We have also commissioned further work, led by Bryan Pomeroy, on expanding private sector shared equity products, and we will launch new shared equity products next year. In the meantime, we will, from today, offer a new 17.5 per cent. Government equity loan for key workers and other priority first-time buyers.

Taken together, these proposals represent not just the most significant programme of house building for decades but an ambitious, positive response to the

growing challenges that many people face in their day-to-day lives. To deliver, we will need a expanded skilled work force, and the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills will lead work to expand construction apprenticeships and work with partners in the sector to raise skills.

We know there is no quick fix to the issues that we face: building more homes takes time. However, this must be a shared endeavour. Central Government are today setting a bolder framework for the future, but we will achieve our goals only if those at regional and local levels, in the public, private and third sectors, and in local communities, all play their part in supporting the homes we need. Building the sustainable homes needed by young people today and by future generations is a test of our commitment to supporting people's aspirations and to achieving social justice. I commend these proposals to the House.

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and I join her in expressing sympathies to all the thousands of victims of flooding in recent days.

The last housing Green Paper in 2000 pledged to be the

"first comprehensive review of housing for 23 years"

and offered

"action to help first time buyers"

and "decent homes for all". That rhetoric has not exactly been matched by reality. Home ownership has fallen for the first time since records began, numbers of first-time buyers are at their lowest since 1980, housing waiting lists have grown by 60,000, and less social housing is being built every year under this Government than under the Major or the Thatcher Government. The Prime Minister's higher taxes have made it harder than ever to get on the housing ladder. The Minister cannot deny that the average first-time buyer now has to pay £1,500 in stamp duty, but is she also aware that the average first-time buyer in London pays £8,000 in stamp duty? Meanwhile, her own Department's research into the Conservative right-to-buy policy praises it as

"one of the most successful housing policies in increasing owner occupation and creating mixed communities."

However, right-to-buy discounts have continued to be squeezed. Will not her ongoing refusal to offer the right to buy to housing association tenants undermine her own goals of creating a greater social mix within communities?

Today's Green Paper talks about 70,000 more affordable homes, but why should we trust the Government when their own social homebuy scheme, which is meant to help social tenants to get on to the housing ladder, is failing? On page 82 of the Green Paper, the Minister admits that of 1,400 housing associations, only 78 have offered the scheme. In April this year, she came to the House and told us that only 33 houses had been sold under the scheme. Perhaps she can give us an update today.

We absolutely accept the need to build more houses. [Hon. Members: "Where?"] I will come to that in a moment. We will lend our cross-party support to measures that build sustainable eco-friendly communities on brownfield sites. We welcome the use of surplus public sector land. However, does the Minister accept that with the NHS in London already conducting estate audits with a view to closing hospitals and selling off land, the public will be worried that more homes will come only at the expense of fewer hospitals? Does she accept that her Government's policies of closing accident and emergency and maternity departments will in any case hinder sustainable growth of local communities?

We heard last week that regional assemblies are to be sidelined, but is not criticism from regional assemblies the real reason why their powers are being seized? Page 30 of the Green Paper says that regional spatial strategies will be reviewed by 2011. Will the Minister promise the House that none of those regional plans will involve the deletion of green belt protection?

In my constituency, we are running a campaign called "No Way To 10k"—in other words, no way to 10,000 houses. However—*[Interruption.]* Wait for it. We fully back the building of 6,000 houses, and have already undertaken to start building them. It is simply the case that 10,000 will overload our local infrastructure, at a time when the local hospital is being closed. Perhaps the Minister will tell us whether the local Labour party is wrong to back my campaign.

We are concerned that the Government's regional building targets are unsustainable. Has the Minister read the Roger Tym report, commissioned by her own Department, into increasing building targets in the south-east? It says that the Government's building plans will

"have a negative impact on the character of the countryside"

and the green belt. Trunk roads will be unable to cope, leading to congestion, pollution and soaring carbon dioxide emissions—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members may say, "Rubbish," but I am talking about the Government's own report. There will be increased

"pressure to develop in these areas of flood risk",

so we can expect more flash floods of the type that we have experienced in recent days and weeks.

Yesterday, the BBC reported that the Green Paper stated that it is "not realistic" to prevent development taking place in areas at risk of flooding. Will the Minister confirm that that wording is no longer in the Green Paper, and how does that square with the 2005 agreement struck between insurers and the Government that areas at risk of flood will be insured only provided that the Government limit such developments?

Labour is not planning the eco-towns of the 21st century; it is planning the sink estates of tomorrow. The Conservative party has been responsible for most of the progressive housing policies of the past 50 years. We built more social housing, spread home ownership and created mixed communities. Does the Minister agree that to solve the housing crisis, it is vital to end the ham-fisted nature of top-down, Whitehall-driven targets? Instead, we should switch to the empowering of local communities to build the homes that stand the test of time.

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post. I congratulate him on his appointment to the Conservative Front Bench, and his first appearance at the Dispatch Box. He was not here for our oral questions two weeks ago. We wondered where he was—and I understand that he was masterminding the by-election in Ealing, Southall. I congratulate him on

[Yvette Cooper]

that particular result, too. My guess is that some of his colleagues sitting behind him might wish he had taken his parliamentary responsibilities a little more seriously, and joined us in the House instead.

I look forward to debating the issues with the hon. Gentleman; I know that he has a long-standing interest in housing. He referred to his "No Way To 10k" campaign against additional housing in Welwyn Hatfield. I am sorry that his new appointment has forced him to change his website. Before he took up his new post, two weeks ago, it read:

"We believe you cannot build your way out of a housing crisis."

He has deleted that since, and the website now says:

"whilst building more properties is obviously vital".

That is a rather rapid turnaround in one paragraph, in the space of just a couple of weeks.

The hon. Gentleman raised a few points, and criticised our record. However, to have lifted 1 million children out of bad housing—cold and damp homes—through the decent homes programme is something of which the House should be proud, and of which his party should feel ashamed. His party left more than 1 million children in appalling housing by failing to deliver proper decent homes, and the council housing improvements that were needed.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Association of British Insurers, which backs the new guidance that was introduced last year, with new, tougher requirements on flooding and planning for flooding He mentioned the Roger Tym report, which was commissioned to inform the planning process. The process needs to be properly informed if sensible decisions are to be taken.

In the end, we must recognise a national collective responsibility to provide for the homes that the future needs. The hon. Gentleman gave us warm words. He said that his party accepted the need for more homes; but will he back 240,000 zero-carbon homes for 2016? Now, across the country, the LGA, house builders, councils and green groups back that target. The challenge for the Conservative party is to back their commitment; otherwise it will be letting down first-time buyers.

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the Green Paper, although as I had 55 minutes to read 128 pages I am sure that I will have missed some of the detailed nuances of policy. I have a few points on which I request clarification.

I want, first, to welcome the intent of the Green Paper. At last, after 10 years, the Government recognise the scale of the housing crisis over which they have presided: with 71 per cent. home ownership—the highest rate in Europe—our market is under-supplied with land and houses and overheated in terms of demand and reckless mortgage lending. We approach the dangers of another wave of negative equity, such as we experienced in the '80s and early '90s. Mortgage debt is up 150 per cent., people are falling behind on mortgages at a rate double that of last year, and repossessions have trebled since last year. That is just the start: 2 million people on fixed-term mortgages with low interest rates will experience a hike in rates in the next 18 months. First-time buyers and key workers cannot get on to the housing ladder in 93 per cent. of urban areas. The Minister spoke of the highest rate of building for 17 years, but she failed to point out that that is from a record low base, with the 2001 rate one of the lowest on record.

If the ownership crisis was due to Government neglect, the rented housing crisis is directly due to dogmatic Government policy. In the past 10 years, the Government have ended council house building and starved councils of funds, despite tenants' choice to stay with the council. Housing associations have managed to build only half the stock that is needed to replace right-to-buy losses, and only about a third of what the Barker review says is needed. The result is that waiting lists have soared from 1 million to 1.6 million.

We welcome the Green Paper's proposed increases in social housing, but will the Minister confirm that despite all the media trailing by her and by the Prime Minister, the small print means more of the same for the 140 councils whose tenants have democratically chosen to stay with them? Will she confirm that the small print says that any extra money will go to housing associations and 60 arm's length management organisations, and that just a small number of councils will be able to launch partnerships with the private sector on the basis of special Government selection? Will she confirm that it is still proposed to rob the 140 councils that have retained their housing stock of 75 per cent. of right-to-buy money, and that most of those councils will lose up to an average of 25 per cent. of their council rents, whereas a housing association taking over that stock would be allowed to keep the entire sum? The housing and regeneration Bill is supposed to put tenants at the heart of social housing; why, then, in the Green Paper, is the Minister ignoring and punishing those very tenants for exercising their democratic choice to stay with the council as landlord?

The Barker review said that 56,000 new social houses a year would be needed if we were to make any impact on the growing waiting list for social housing. Currently, housing associations have managed an average of about 25,000 houses a year. The Green Paper proposes an increase, by 2011, to only 45,000. Will the Minister explain such poverty of ambition after all the hype, in the face of desperate housing need?

On sustainability—

Hon. Members: Come on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister say why councils are not allowed to set higher environmental energy standards for private developments, as they are on affordable housing? That gives private developers an unfair financial advantage over affordable builders and produces fewer sustainable buildings. Why is the Government's aim for all new houses to be zero carbon by only 2016, when a target of 2011 is perfectly attainable in this country and has already been achieved in Germany?

Finally, will the Minister explain why, despite all the talk at other times in recent weeks of restoring democracy and autonomy to local authorities, the Green Paper represents the imposition of yet more central control, with the Government dictating what

houses will be built, where, by which councils and in partnership with whom? Why not simply restore autonomy to local authorities? Why not allow them to decide what they will build in their areas and get the benefit from that, and restore financial control to them?

Yvette Cooper: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not taken the opportunity to support the delivery of 240,000 zero-carbon homes by 2016, because it is important to increase housing in this country. He is missing the point on affordable housing. We have set out proposals for 70,000 affordable homes by 2010. That is a substantial increase in social housing and includes councils, too, being able to build homes. However, many areas will find it more cost-effective to do that in partnership with housing associations or private developers. We have said specifically—it is in the consultation paper—that we are approving ALMOs and councils with special venture vehicles to build council homes and bid for social housing grant in order to do so. The important issue is about providing the additional homes that we need. We want the flexibility for housing associations, councils and private developers to be able to contribute to the building of more social and shared ownership housing. Local housing companies offer a great opportunity to do so.

The decent homes programme continues in its current form, and all bar one council have now identified ways of meeting that standard, including as a result of the substantial investment that has gone to individual councils. We have the most ambitious target to get to zero carbon of any country in the world. The target includes standards not only for heating and power, but for appliances in the home. The standards are extremely ambitious. We will need improvements in technology and strong co-operation between local councils and private developers to meet them. They are ambitious standards, but we have a dual aim: to be able to deliver more homes that are both affordable and sustainable. That requires a little hard-headedness, not just the flaky sums that the Liberal Democrats often provide.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I repeat the plea that I made during the earlier statement. This statement is important, but there is a further important statement and the main business of the House to follow. I ask hon. Members to discipline themselves to one supplementary question and a brief response; otherwise, I am afraid that many of them will be unsuccessful in catching my eye.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I am pleased that the Minister has taken up the recommendation that was made by Shelter and endorsed by the Communities and Local Government Committee to increase social rented housing, but I am still not clear about how the Government's proposals will ensure that social rented housing is provided in response to local needs, particularly in areas where councils are rated relatively poorly and have therefore not been allowed the rights of more highly rated councils.

Yvette Cooper: We are clear that we need to increase social housing in all areas of the country. We are concerned that the level of social housing has not increased in some areas, perhaps in part because housing associations in those areas did not bid for new developments. That is one of the reasons we want local councils to play a stronger role—including through local housing companies and by using their own land—in delivering mixed communities and, potentially, high levels of new housing in their areas.

In addition to the work of housing associations and the partnerships that are possible between housing associations and local councils, we are saying that local councils should be able to build council homes, where it offers value for money to do so. We are identifying certain ALMOs that will be able to bid, and consulting on proposals to enable councils to keep the rents and capital receipts from the new homes that they build. We are opening the next round of pre-qualification to ALMOs that have a two-star rating and to local authorities, so as to widen the number of organisations that can apply, but they will need to ensure that they have the appropriate skills in place to carry out the necessary development work.

This is not about returning to the old council estates. It needs to be about mixed communities and about developing, in partnership, communities that people want to live in. There is a range of different ways of doing that, and we will work closely with local councils and housing associations to take this forward.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): But none of this is going to happen if the planning system does not permit it. The Government are making it easier to build conservatories, granny annexes and nuclear power stations, but they are not doing a lot to make it easier to build houses. Would not it be a good start to abandon and rule out definitively their ill-conceived proposals for a planning gain tax, and to concentrate on getting more out of the devil that everyone knows—section 106 agreements—or on moving to a roof tax? At least we would then have some certainty.

Yvette Cooper: I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to the Green Paper proposals that set out a series of alternatives to a planning gain supplement. We think that a planning gain supplement has the potential to raise the most resources for infrastructure while not deterring development, because it is value sensitive. We are prepared to consult on and discuss a range of alternatives before we bring in a planning gain supplement Bill, but we will require councils and other developers to make serious proposals on how they would make those alternatives work. As I have said, we believe that there are advantages to a planning gain supplement.

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her announcement and on the Green Paper. I give my wholehearted support to the commitment to expand the housing programme, which will be warmly welcomed by sane people throughout the country. The lesson from the past that everyone should learn is that the mono-tenure estates that we created in the last century—in the owner-occupied sector

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

and in the public housing sector—were a serious mistake. Will my hon. Friend remain adamant about maintaining mixed communities involving a partnership between different providers, and not be tempted by the blandishments of the back-to-the-future Liberal Democrats, who appear to want to take us back to some kind of failed response, which would be a serious mistake?

Yvette Cooper: My right hon. Friend is right. Mixed communities are hugely important in sustaining those areas and providing opportunities for the people who live in them. Establishing such communities was one of the aspirations of the post-war generation, but it did not manage to achieve it. It is crucial that we get those partnerships working, and we believe that there is potential for local housing companies to develop exactly that kind of approach, to ensure that we do not have mono-tenure estates involving unfair segregation, with social housing estates on one side of town and the executive estate on the other.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): I, too, welcome the proposals to increase the supply of housing. I note the announcement of a £3 billion increase in the budget for affordable housing. Will the Minister confirm that she was successful in getting all that money out of the Treasury, and that she has not had to raid any other part of her Department's budget to find it?

Yvette Cooper: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman welcomes the increase in affordable housing, and in housing across the board. I know that, as a former housing Minister, he takes a strong interest in these matters. As part of this investment, we are getting greater efficiencies from housing associations—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] In addition to the £3 billion additional public sector investment going into social housing and shared ownership housing, we shall get efficiencies from housing associations, because we believe that many of them are not using their assets sufficiently effectively. We want to ensure that we get better results and better value for money.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that there used to be an excellent firm in my constituency called British Mohair Spinners? Unfortunately, it went down the tubes many years ago, but it is good to know that its factory site is now being used to create many apartments, which will be of great use to my constituents. Is my hon. Friend quite sure that firms that are not keen on developing such brownfield sites are being allowed to use greenfield sites only when there are absolutely no brownfield sites left in the area?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the need to regenerate brownfield sites and the need to require developers to consider them. Local councils must decide how land should be identified in the area, to determine which sites are appropriate and to set their own brownfield targets. PPS3, the new planning policy on housing, gives local councils the flexibility to set their own brownfield targets and to take action if they think that developers are cherry-picking on greenfield sites.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Does the Minister accept that we have a housing crisis because of this Government's failure over the past 10 years? Paragraph 40 of her policy statement refers to the building of council homes. Will the Minister clarify how many of the 2 million new homes envisaged by the year 2016 will be council homes?

Yvette Cooper: That will depend on the decisions that councils take, including about ALMOs. It will also depend on what proposals they make in connection with local housing companies or bids for social housing grants. What we can say is that we believe that, by 2010, 70,000 new homes need to be affordable and 45,000 of them should be social homes. The proportion of council homes will depend, as I say, on decisions taken by councils, developers and housing associations across the country. We believe that, in many cases, housing associations will be able to bring in additional private sector resources and additional borrowing. We also think that the best results are likely to happen where there is partnership between the different organisations.

Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that today's statement provides opportunities for the 13,000 families on my local authority waiting list if, and only if, local authorities take full advantage of the opportunities to ensure decent homes for these people?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that there is a huge responsibility on local councils to do more to improve and increase housing in their areas. We are giving local councils more flexibility and more powers—different options, different ways forward, different ways of using their own resources, different ways of drawing in additional resources either from central Government or from the private sector. We are giving local councils a much stronger role in housing in the local area, but we need them to rise to the challenge and do their bit to deliver the homes that their communities need.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale) (Con): Two weeks ago, Scarborough council's planning committee refused permission for 300 new homes opposite Filey school because it believed that the main drainage and foul drainage were inadequate. The drainage system overflowed and was proved to be inadequate in the Filey floods last week. Will the Minister use this new planning policy statement as an opportunity to place greater emphasis on the importance of adequate drainage and foul drainage, which are the cause of so much suffering during the current floods?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about drainage. Some terrible events over the last month are due to poor drainage or drainage simply overflowing as a result of the level of rainfall and water. We think that more can be done to improve drainage. There are some good examples, as in the design of Milton Keynes, which had very good drainage proposals ensuring the use of balancing pools into which water can flow. There are also new designs, which improve drainage by providing sustainable urban drainage systems that do not take all of the water into existing mains drains. The hon. Gentleman is also right

that there are other ways of using the opportunity of new development—by accessing section 106 money, for example—to improve the infrastructure, including the drainage. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is looking into a wider range of issues surrounding improving drainage in response to flooding, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are looking into taking proposals forward, not just as part of the new planning policy statement on climate change, but as part of a wider programme of work to deliver more sustainable housing.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): In welcoming my hon. Friend's statement, may I draw her attention to one of the problems in areas such as inner-city Manchester? An awful lot of new houses have been built that it was hoped would be affordable, but the process was frustrated by the speculative buying of many people from this country and outside Britain who bought to let, pushing prices up and putting houses out of the reach of ordinary people? Will she look specifically at that? There is nothing wrong with the rental market, but there is something wrong with speculative purchase, which pushes prices up and up.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will agree that affordable private rented housing is important, but we need to ensure that it is both affordable and of an appropriate quality. I have particular concerns about some of the investment that is not buy to let, but buy to leave, whereby flats or new developments are left empty as a result of investors or speculators sitting on properties. Local councils should think carefully about using some of their empty homes powers to bring some of those properties back into use. They have the powers to do so, but we are looking at more incentives as part of the Green Paper to support that.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Last December, the Minister and her colleagues endorsed a housing development that would result in the concreting over of 1,500 acres of green belt land in my constituency. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister promised at that Dispatch Box that such land will be robustly protected. Will the Minister confirm that her previous policy has changed and that that land is now safe, or are we not to trust the new Prime Minister's promises?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman will know that we do not comment on individual planning decisions in the House, but our policy on the green belt remains precisely the same as it has always been. We have made that clear both in the planning White Paper and in the House as part of the Green Paper.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement and the increase in funding for housing. My area has a thriving private sector market, mostly on brownfield sites, and a successful ALMO, which has hugely improved the number of decent homes, but there is still an acute shortage of social housing. Will she ensure that there are new models of working between local authorities, ALMOs, housing associations and funders such as local building societies to assess housing need and secure the models that will deliver those houses for people?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. His local council is under a responsibility to assess housing need in the area, but it needs to draw together different organisations to ensure that it can respond to that need. We are giving councils greater flexibility to do so, and I hope that they will be able to find partners to join them to rise to that challenge.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister set forward the aim of creating more affordable homes, but does she not recognise that there are a number of contradictions in the Green Paper? The standards that will be required—higher standards and new designs and technologies—will involve extra upfront costs. The green spaces that will be required for greener homes and green spaces will involve less intensive land use. All those factors, along with the fact that the £3 billion is not even an extra £3 billion, will make it very difficult to deliver homes that are more affordable and not more costly.

Yvette Cooper: No, the £3 billion is extra public sector funding for affordable housing. On top of that, we will get additional efficiencies from housing associations. That is what allows us to reach the figure of 70,000 additional homes that we will provide. In addition, it is true that we are raising standards at the same time as we deliver new homes. That is challenging to the industry, housing associations and developers across the country. It is an opportunity for us to raise additional resources through planning gain, which can contribute to that. Some of the higher standards, particularly in environmental technologies, will be delivered and will have the potential to deliver economies of scale, which, over time, should drive the costs of those new technologies down. I do not think that we have a choice. We cannot simply choose between quantity and quality. We have to provide both.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the part of my right hon. Friend's statement that emphasises partnership work between local authorities, the private sector and housing associations. In my constituency, there are some excellent examples of that already, which are delivering affordable homes and regenerating former coal-mining villages. However, that work is under threat from the regional spatial strategy, which will put an artificial limit on the number of new houses that can be built in Durham. When the regional spatial strategy is agreed, will she ensure that these artificial limits, which will kill off communities and not do what she wants, are not allowed?

Yvette Cooper: I cannot comment on the detail of the regional spatial strategy at this stage of the process. We need additional house building in the north and the south. The approach taken in the previous regional planning guidance and the previous restrictions that were in place contributed to the lack of affordability across the north. We have to make sure that that does not happen again.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): The Minister said:

"I can announce that the Ministry of Defence has agreed to bring forward six sites with the potential for 7,000 homes"

including in Aldershot. Is this, perchance, the same scheme that has been up and running for the past three years—Project Connaught—or is it a brand new scheme? In either case, who will decide the mix between affordable and other forms of housing? Thanks to the former Deputy Prime Minister's garden-grabbing policy, we have a surfeit of apartments and flats, when what we need in Aldershot and Farnborough is more family homes. I would like an assurance from the Minister that we will get them.

Yvette Cooper: We are announcing today additional land agreed in partnership between the Ministry of Defence and English Partnerships, with 50 per cent. affordable housing on those sites. The local planning authority will decide the appropriate mix to ensure that there are sufficient family homes. He is right to raise the issue of family homes. There are many areas where we need more family homes to meet the needs of the local community. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will make representations to his local planning authority.

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): My constituents will welcome the Government's commitment to build more affordable homes, as did those in my neighbouring constituency of Ealing, Southall last Thursday. What can my right hon. Friend do about Tory councils such as Hammersmith and Fulham that have adopted policies to cut by half the amount of affordable housing being built and to cut the number of affordable rented homes to a quarter of the amount achieved by the previous Labour council?

Yvette Cooper: It is disappointing when councils oppose additional affordable homes, including more social housing, as included in the Green Paper. We will expect councils across the country, whatever their political complexion, to respond to that challenge.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): The Minister announced that Chichester, in addition to Aldershot, will take extra houses on a MOD site. How many will Chichester be expected to take? Is it realistic for Chichester to cope with those houses in view of the fact that the Government are intending to downgrade St. Richard's, the major hospital there?

Yvette Cooper: I hoped that the hon. Gentleman would take the opportunity to welcome the possibility of additional affordable homes in his constituency. Around 50 per cent. of the new homes on MOD sites will need to be affordable, including social housing and shared-ownership housing. I am sure that first-time buyers in and around his constituency will welcome that. At this stage, we cannot anticipate the planning process. We need full assessments of the level of housing on a particular site and the level of infrastructure required. The Government are investing substantial sums in additional infrastructure and although Opposition Members call for more infrastructure, they are never willing to back the extra money for it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now conclude questions on this statement. I realise that many Members will be disappointed, but I hope that they understand that there is a further statement and the main business to follow.

Intergovernmental Conference

5.14 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Jim Murphy): I would like to make a statement on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office White Paper on the United Kingdom's approach to the European Union intergovernmental conference. The White Paper will be laid before the House today. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House, and they can also be obtained from the Vote Office. It will also be available on the FCO website.

I will publish tomorrow a written ministerial statement to accompany a Command Paper that will examine the non-IGC priorities of the Portuguese presidency for the remainder of 2007. In a meeting today in Brussels attended by the Foreign Secretary, the 27 EU member states will launch an IGC to draw up a reform treaty for the enlarged EU. We expect a first draft of the treaty text to be published at that meeting. It will be an amending treaty, which will be good for the UK and the EU, and it will be prepared on the basis of the IGC mandate agreed by the June European Council. The IGC will agree changes to the existing EC and EU treaties to make the EU's institutions more transparent, effective and efficient.

The Portuguese presidency plans to update Foreign Ministers on the progress of the IGC at its informal meeting on 8 September. The presidency aims to reach agreement on a text at the informal European Council meeting in Lisbon on 18 October, and to sign it off formally at the December European Council. That is an ambitious timetable but, on the basis of the very good deal the UK secured at the June European Council, the Government support the aim of reaching an early agreement.

The process should help bring to a close several years of debate on institutional reform, and resolve that for the foreseeable future. The proposed reform treaty will be an amending treaty based on the existing EU treaties. As paragraph 1 of the IGC mandate states:

"The constitutional concept, which consisted in repealing all existing Treaties and replacing them by a single text called 'Constitution', is abandoned."

The Government's approach to the IGC negotiations is set out in detail in today's White Paper. We want a reform treaty that provides a way for the member states of an enlarged EU to work together for mutual benefit, sets out the EU's powers and limits, ensures that foreign policy remains based on unanimity, protects national security, and gives national Parliaments a greater role in EU decision making.

The Government will not accept a treaty that transfers power from the UK on issues of fundamental importance to our sovereignty. The agreement reached at the June European Council reflects the red lines set out by the UK. At the Council, we made it clear that we wanted a treaty without constitutional characteristics, and we stated clearly that we would not accept anything in a new treaty that required us to change our existing labour and social legislation; we would protect our common law system and our police and judicial processes; we would maintain an independent foreign and defence policy; and we would protect our tax and social security system. We secured all of that in the IGC mandate. We also secured an important clarification that national security is outside the scope of the treaty: the new treaty will state explicitly that national security remains the sole responsibility of each member state.

The measures set out in the IGC mandate, which now need to be turned into treaty text, offer the prospect of an EU that is more effective, democratic, open, and streamlined. The reform treaty will help to make the EU more coherent. The presidency currently rotates every six months. Instead, a new permanent President of the European Council will serve for a period of two and a half years. Over the next two and a half years, the presidency will be held in six-monthly rotation by Portugal, Slovenia, France, the Czech Republic and Sweden. In future, the permanent presidency will help to ensure better continuity.

The reform treaty will help to make the EU better able to take decisions. The principle of qualified majority voting, established by the treaty of Rome in 1958 and substantially expanded in the Single European Act 1986, will be extended to allow decisions to be taken more easily on issues where the 27 member states can bring genuine value by acting together. The UK will retain control over issues of importance to our national sovereignty, but there are many areas where it will be in our interest to work with EU partners, and to unblock decision making to allow us to do so efficiently—such as on urgent EU aid to third countries and humanitarian support operations.

The reform treaty will also help to make the EU more effective on the global stage. The IGC mandate includes a declaration stating that nothing in the treaty affects the responsibilities and powers of member states in foreign policy. Currently the EU has two primary external-facing roles: the EU high representative for the common foreign and security policy, and the Commissioner for External Relations. The reform treaty will replace those roles with one new high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. That will give the EU a clearer voice in promoting the agreed objectives that member states want to deliver around the world, without impacting on the independence of member states' foreign policies.

Additional reforms proposed in the treaty are aimed at making the EU more democratic—with a welcome and greater role for national parliaments to be involved in the work of the EU, not least in policing subsidiarity—and more streamlined, with a smaller Commission, and a reduction in the number of Members of the European Parliament. Conservative Members may be pleased to learn that the reform treaty also sets out a mechanism for withdrawal from the EU.

Despite that, Britain's place is and should remain within the EU, and this Government believe strongly that a policy of positive and active engagement in Europe over the past 10 years has yielded great benefits for the UK. EU membership brings us real gains in terms of wealth, jobs, peace and security. Around 3 million British jobs are linked directly and indirectly to our trade with other EU countries. More than half of our overseas trade is with other EU countries. Recent EU initiatives to tackle climate change and energy security have demonstrated the concrete benefits of active membership. The EU presidency statement on the Litvinenko case last week was very helpful.

[Mr. Jim Murphy]

By the end of the IGC process, the EU should have moved beyond the seemingly continuous conversation about institutional reform and instead be focused on tackling the delivery deficit and on the issues where the EU can make real improvements in people's lives. That includes EU co-operation in areas such as climate change, energy security, consumer protection, migration, economic reform and the fight against world poverty and international terror. On the issue of economic reform, for example, despite recent and real progress, there are 92 million economically inactive people of working age in the EU—more than the combined population of Scandinavia and all 10 of the member states who joined the EU in 2004. So it is clear that Europe has to be more effective in its delivery.

The mandate for the IGC promises to deliver a reform treaty that will achieve the UK's aims and deliver for Britain, and for Europe, the capacity to act more effectively to tackle global challenges together. We are stronger when we work together with our partners in the EU to meet the shared challenges we face. An EU of 27 member states, with the prospect of further expansion in future, needs the reform treaty. The treaty will allow us to move beyond questions of process, and focus on delivering prosperity and security for our citizens. That is firmly in the interests of the EU, and most definitely in the interests of the UK. I therefore welcome the commencement of the IGC process, and the publication of this White Paper. The result, I have no doubt, will be a treaty that is good for Britain and good for Europe, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This White Paper is long overdue. We have before us a treaty of fundamental importance to the nature of the European Union and Britain's relationship with it. It is two years since the original EU constitution was rejected by French and Dutch voters, during which time the Government were largely notable for their silence. They have shown determination only in keeping the House and voters in the dark.

On the nature of what is set to be agreed by the intergovernmental conference, does the Minister agree with the Irish Prime Minister, who says that the new treaty is 90 per cent. the same as the constitution, or the Spanish Foreign Minister, who said yesterday that it is 98 per cent. the same? Does he agree with the Danish Prime Minister, who said that

"all the symbolic elements are gone, and that which really matters—the core—is left"?

Or does he agree with the German Chancellor, who said:

"The fundamentals of the Constitution have been maintained in large part"?

Even if he disagrees with the leaders of other EU countries, will the Minister confirm what members of his own Government have said about the treaty? Was not the then Foreign Secretary and current Lord Chancellor right when he said that if the treaty contained an EU President and EU Foreign Minister, it would effectively be the constitution, or does the treaty not create an EU President and an EU Foreign Minister? Was not the Trade Minister—Digby, Lord Jones of Birmingham, to give him his full title—right when he said:

"This is a con to call this a treaty—it's not. It's exactly the same—it's a Constitution."

If the Minister will not take it from those two ministerial colleagues, will he take it from his own Prime Minister, who, when asked at an Anglo-Irish press conference last week what he had been discussing, replied:

"The Taoiseach and I have had a meeting this morning. We have discussed the European constitution and how that can move forward".

If even the Prime Minister can no longer keep up the pretence that the treaty is not a constitution, why is the Minister for Europe still bothering?

The Minister has pointed to one line in paragraph 1 of the IGC mandate to show that the constitutional concept is, as he put it, "abandoned". What he did not read out to the House, however, was the very next sentence, which states that the new treaty

"will introduce into the existing Treaties, which remain in force, the innovations...from the 2004 IGC, as set out below in a detailed fashion."

In other words, the constitution has essentially been brought back, but the name has just been changed. Was that not exactly the deal that the German presidency set out in its report of 14 June, which referred to

"Avoiding...the symbolism and the title 'Constitution'"

while

"the substance of the Constitutional Treaty...should be preserved"?

The simple truth is this: the Government's main aim has been to re-label the constitution and hide how that has been done in the small print so that they can get out of their promise of a referendum. Is not that why the former Italian Prime Minister and current Home Minister said that the new treaty was "unreadable", adding that the

"UK prime minister...can go to the Commons and say, 'Look, you see, it's absolutely unreadable, it's the typical Brussels treaty, nothing new, no need for a referendum.'"

Will the Government seek changes to the IGC mandate, or do they regard the current text as inviolable? When will an English text be available, given that the treaty has been published today only in French? Will the Minister confirm that an English text will be available to the House before we rise for the summer recess?

Does the Minister accept the opinion of legal experts that the new wording on competition seriously weakens the EU's commitment to free and open competition? Should not the old wording in fact be restored?

Does the Minister share the concern that the new treaty, for the first time, potentially subordinates national Parliaments to EU institutions? Will he ensure that the wording of the relevant clause on that point is changed from "shall" to "may"? Will the Government support the Czech proposals for a new mechanism for member states to take back powers from the EU where that is appropriate?

As the IGC will be held in the summer recess, how will the House of Commons have genuine input into the process? I understand that the Foreign Affairs Committee, whose Chairman is in his place, has asked

Ministers to appear before it during the recess. Has that offer been accepted and, if so, what are the dates for the scheduled hearings?

Is not the Minister just a tad concerned that the so-called red lines are falling to pieces after only a couple of weeks' scrutiny? On the first red line—the charter of fundamental rights—is the Minister worried that Advocate-General Tizzano of the European Court of Justice thinks that no legal safeguard on the charter of fundamental rights will work if it is made legally binding, as the Government have agreed? Has he seen yesterday's opinion from the Swedish Prime Minister that

"it should be stressed that the UK was given a clarification, not an opt-out."?

Why has that red line already been downgraded from covering any change to UK law in any way simply to cover existing labour and social legislation? So that line is collapsing already.

On the second red line regarding criminal justice, can the Minister explain why it will no longer be intergovernmental, but subject to the European Court of Justice's jurisdiction when the Government specifically blocked that, with our support, in the treaties of Amsterdam and Nice? Can he explain why our national veto has been downgraded to only an opt-in?

On the third red line regarding the independence of our foreign policy, does the Minister share the apparent concern of the legal adviser to the European Scrutiny Committee that, because the safeguard on foreign affairs is only a non-legally binding declaration, it may be meaningless?

On the fourth red line regarding taxation, which we have argued all along was put up as a red herring, has the Minister seen the BBC Europe editor, Mark Mardell's blog of 6 July? *[Interruption.]* Labour Members should listen to this; it refers to their Government. He said of that red line:

"The Government have the good grace to privately admit it was a bit of a con and was purely presentational."

So there are vital issues at stake, even outside of the so-called red lines themselves.

Can the Minister explain why the Government now support a single legal personality for the EU, when the then Prime Minister boasted all along that he had blocked what he called "this potentially damaging proposal" at Amsterdam? Importantly, can he confirm that the ratchet clause, which would allow further centralising treaty changes without the need for an intergovernmental conference, is still in?

In the 2004 White Paper, the Government claimed that the constitution did not fundamentally change the EU. Now, they say that the constitution would have fundamentally changed the EU, but that the new treaty does not. If Ministers now admit that they were wrong then, why should we—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. As we have limited time for this statement, will the hon. Gentleman please draw his remarks to a close?

Mr. Francois: You were 30 seconds ahead of me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Almost every MP in the House stood on a manifesto that promised a referendum on the EU constitution. EU leaders, including the Prime Minister, say that the new treaty is the EU constitution. Ministers say that they want more accountability and consultation, so why will they not make themselves accountable and consult the British people? Why should the British people trust the Government, when the Government will not trust them? So we say: honour our promises, trust the people and let them decide.

Mr. Murphy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind half sentence at the beginning of his comments. He asked 13 or 14 subsequent questions, and I will try to get through as many of them as time allows. Incidentally, that is more questions than there are Conservative Back Benchers here today on this important issue.

The hon. Gentleman asks what the difference is between this and the original constitution. There is a substantial set of differences, not only across the EU, but specifically here in the UK. Not only do we have the opt-in on justice and home affairs, we also have the 13 exemptions or protections on qualified majority voting. Of course, we also have the protocol on the charter of fundamental rights.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the comments of my noble Friend comrade Lord trade commissar Digby Jones. If the hon. Gentleman were to be fair, as I know that he can be, he would also share with the House the fact that the noble Lord made those comments before the IGC process while commenting on the old constitutional treaty. The hon. Gentleman talks of our attitude on the IGC process. We are not tempted to reopen issues of substance on the basis that we got a very good deal.

On competition, the hon. Gentleman asks specifics. The fact is that the legal position on competition has not been changed. The system will ensure that competition in the internal market is not distorted, and that is guaranteed in a legally binding protocol in a number of treaty references: articles 4, 27, 34, 81 to 89, 96, 98, 105 and 157 of the European Community treaty.

The hon. Gentleman asked about a BBC blog. I have not had a chance to read it—I was too busy reading the various EU articles on unfettered competition—and I have the good sense not to have my own blog.

There is a strengthened role for national Parliaments, which should be welcomed across the House, particularly in relation to the issues of subsidiarity. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that it is important that we continue to keep Parliament informed. I have attended relevant Select Committees in the House of Commons and the House of Lords on that very issue in the past week or two, and we will continue to find ways to keep Parliament informed, including by providing draft non-confidential information that arises from the IGC process. The timing of the Foreign Affairs Committee hearing is really not an issue for Ministers.

It is absolutely clear that the foreign policy situation is unchanged. It is an issue of unanimity, where the rights of member states and national Governments are protected. On the issue of justice and home affairs, we do have that opt-in. On the charter of fundamental rights, I can do no better than to quote from article 1 of the IGC mandate:

"the Charter does not extend the ability of the Court of Justice, or any court or tribunal of the United Kingdom, to find that the

[Mr. Jim Murphy]

laws, regulations or administrative provisions, practices or action of the United Kingdom are inconsistent with the fundamental rights, freedoms and principles that"

the charter "reaffirms."

I re-emphasise the point that we have not had referendums on previous treaties. This treaty transfers less power than Maastricht and the Single European Act. Only one member state—our good friends the Irish—is considering a referendum on the treaty. I look forward to continuing this conversation with the hon. Gentleman through the recess and beyond.

Mr. Michael Moore (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (LD): We wholeheartedly agree with the Minister's statement that the European Union brings real gains in terms of wealth, jobs, peace and security. Similarly, we agree that one of the key aims of the new treaty ought to be to ensure that the European Union is more effective, democratic, open and streamlined. However, Members on both sides of the House—whether they are for or against the European Union—will be disappointed by his reply about the way in which we will scrutinise the efforts of his Government.

Given that the Minister is making his statement today, just as the text of the treaty is being published in Brussels, and given that most of the work on the treaty will be completed before the House returns in October, how does he square that with the Foreign Secretary's statement in the House in response to the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes)? The Foreign Secretary said:

"I am keen that we have extensive investigation and scrutiny of the mandate and then of the reform treaty when it finally comes forward as a treaty". —[*Official Report*, 3 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 801.]

Does the Minister accept that if he does not allow adequate scrutiny as this stage by this national Parliament, he risks undermining one of the key principles of the new treaty before it is even established?

Mr. Murphy: In response to the pretty fair point that the hon. Gentleman makes, the fact is that the treaty envisages a much enhanced role for national Parliaments—interestingly both for the House of Commons and the other place. So, as he says, it is important that we continue to find ways to maintain that dialogue in Parliament and with Parliament's Select Committees. That is why both the Foreign Secretary and I have accepted the kind invitation of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes), the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, to appear before his Committee at a time of its choosing, rather than our choosing. At least some of that will happen during the parliamentary recess. Of course, we remain available to discuss the issues with other Select Committees and we continue to seek opportunities to discuss the issues with Front Benchers and Back Benchers of all parties. I am meeting the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois), who speaks for the Conservatives on this issue, on Wednesday, and the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Mr. Moore), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats on this issue, tomorrow. I look forward to continued opportunities to discuss, bilaterally and with the Select Committees, ways of continuing to inform the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind right hon. and hon. Members of the importance of asking single supplementary questions, for short responses. We still have important business: the introduction of new Members and the main business before the House.

Mike Gapes (Ilford, South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has confirmed that the constitutional concept has been abandoned, and I welcome that. However, I ask that when he appears before the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, which I hope will be a few days after the meeting on 8 September, he will give us greater clarity about the way in which the strengthening of the foreign policy aspects of the European Union will be taken forward. Will the welcome initiative of our Prime Minister and President Sarkozy be more effective under the new arrangements, so that we can, for example, end the conflict in Darfur?

Mr. Murphy: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I can think of no better way of spending the parliamentary recess than appearing before him and his Committee. My hon. Friend is right to mention the opportunities that result from having a co-operative approach with our European partners on defence, foreign policy and many other matters. I once again reassure my hon. Friend and others that the UK has a veto on foreign policy. That is entirely appropriate. Where we agree with our European partners, we can act together, but where we continue to disagree, we can of course act alone, if we so wish.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): Will the Minister comment on the notorious new division of competences, or powers, in the draft constitution, whereby the EU gains exclusive power over commercial and competition policy, and whereby most other policy areas are defined in a way that prevents national Parliaments from legislating when the EU decides to do so? That was controversial at the time, and it was in large measure opposed by the Government in unsuccessful amendments, so why has the Minister apparently given up on that matter, and why is he waving it through? Will he attempt to get those powers back through amendments tabled at the intergovernmental conference?

Mr. Murphy: We do not intend to table substantive changes to the IGC treaty agreement. I have already made it clear that European competitiveness and free and unfettered competition will be protected as part of a binding protocol on competition. On the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and the charter of fundamental rights, the UK's position on the protocol aligned with that is clear.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I warmly welcome the statement and thank the Minister and his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon), for the work that was done on 22 June to secure such a good deal for Britain. Will the Minister ensure that there is full engagement with the British people during the process, so that they can rely on proper information from the Government, rather than on Mark Mardell's blog?

Mr. Murphy: It was remiss of me not to pay a warm tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon), the former Minister for Europe, for his work in that role at the outset; it is possibly more important to do so now that he is Government Chief Whip. I also wish to pay my respects to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), who was also a former Minister for Europe. He did an enormous amount of work in trying to destroy some of the myths around the issue of Europe and the European Union. I do not wish to pick on Mr. Mark Mardell, but any advice that anyone in the House can give to provide an accurate picture of the real benefit of the European Union to the United Kingdom is welcome. For example, it has meant 3 million jobs, co-operation on environmental issues, clean water, cleaner beaches, cleaner air—those are the real and substantive improvements and changes that the EU can deliver.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): The Minister honourably maintains that the treaty is completely different from the constitutional treaty, even though no European Government, and no other sentient being, agrees with his point of view. Nevertheless, for old time's sake, will he remind us what the last Labour manifesto said about the European constitution and a referendum?

Mr. Murphy: As I said at the outset, the constitutional concept has been abandoned. There is a radical difference between the reform treaty and the prior constitutional treaty. The real test, as we look around Europe, is how many of the other 27 member states of the European Union are even contemplating holding a referendum—just one, our great friends, the Irish, simply because of their specific constitutional arrangement and the nature of their Parliament. In the United Kingdom we have a different parliamentary and constitutional arrangement from that of our good friends in Ireland.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that because of a number of imposed majority votes within the Community and particularly within the Commission, Britain is losing control over its safety audit in aviation and engineering, and in relation to our ports and to single skies. Will he therefore propose that the House creates a safety audit to look closely at any aspect of European institutions, however they are framed and however they are imposed?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend raises important points, and I look forward to discussing them with her, if she so wishes. There is an extension of qualified majority voting but much of it is minor and technical, and much of it is to re-establish existing practice—for example, qualified majority voting on the technicalities of German reunification. That is important. There are other examples of qualified majority voting on international aid and humanitarian support, but on the specific issue that my hon. Friend raises, I am happy to meet her and other hon. Friends before the parliamentary recess, if time in her diary allows.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does the Minister accept that he has a fight on his hands, and that this dishonest treaty is one of constitutional change? It may not be exactly the same as the constitutional treaty that came before, but it is equivalent, and that is the important fact. When he next comes before the European Scrutiny Committee, will he bring the Foreign Office legal adviser so that we can ask him questions that the Minister cannot answer?

Mr. Murphy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind and gallant comments, which are never knowingly understated. I can put my response no more clearly than by quoting the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who chairs the Conservatives' democracy taskforce, who said:

"The idea we have a referendum is frankly absurd."

I can think of no more appropriate response to the comments of the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Conservatives' approach, because their obsessive Europhobia is a guarantee of third place results in elections to come. Does my hon. Friend agree that the proposed reform treaty creates a president of the European council of nations which the European Commission opposed because it gives more power to the nations of Europe, that foreign policy remains under the control of the nations of Europe, and that the Parliaments of the nations of Europe will have more power, so the treaty is one of the weakest since 1957? We might as well have a referendum on the results in Ealing, Southall and in Sedgefield, which were good for the country. Holding a referendum on the treaty is a plain absurdity.

Mr. Murphy: Again, I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend as a former Minister for Europe. He is correct that the treaty transfers—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Far too many individual conversations are taking place.

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend is right. The treaty transfers much less power than the Single European Act or the treaty of Maastricht. Of course, all the Opposition Members who were in government at the time voted against a referendum on Maastricht, which was much more significant in its transfer of powers. It seems to many objective observers that the Conservative party of today is captured by a rabid anti-Euro fanaticism that is fantastic in its proportion and out of touch with reality.

Mr. Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister cannot but be aware of the growing disenchantment that exists regarding the ever-expanding EU. He declares that the treaty is not a revised constitution. Others beg to differ. Is not the simplest way to resolve that conflict to let the people of the United Kingdom decide by way of referendum?

Mr. Murphy: Europe plays an enormous role in supporting the economy of Northern Ireland. Although the issue of cross-border co-operation is, of course, part of the constitutional settlement between north and south, we are not attracted to the level of co-operation to which the hon. Gentleman has alluded by following the Republic of Ireland in being the only other member state of the EU to sign up to having a referendum.

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Will the Minister eschew the seductive suggestion of the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) to remove the word "shall" from provisions on democratic principles and replace it with the word "may"? He will be aware that the particular provision covers subsidiarity, proportionality, freedom, security, justice, treaty revision and inter-parliamentary co-operation, all subjects that are of some interest to every Member of this House.

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is right. That is why we are not reopening the issues of great substance in conversation with our European colleagues. Nevertheless, we continue to examine the precise wording of draft treaties, and I will return to the House and to my hon. Friend with the specifics in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Do Her Majesty's Government support the inclusion in the reform treaty of a new mechanism for withdrawal from the European Union, and how would that mechanism work?

Mr. Murphy: We support the inclusion of that specific clause in the treaty. The way to bring about that outcome is to vote for either the Conservative party or the UK Independence party at the next general election. On Europe, it is sometimes difficult to work out the difference between those two parties.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD): I welcome the general direction outlined by the Minister and hope that the IGC meets with success. Does he agree that whether or not there is a referendum in due course—in the past 10 years under the previous premiership, the pro-European forces across parties and outside politics have on more than one occasion been marched up to the top of the hill in anticipation of something only to be marched down again—the Government need to get on the front foot, to take a broadly based proactive stance about constructive, sensible engagement in Europe and to isolate the extremist voices for what they are?

Mr. Murphy: The right hon. Gentleman is correct. Europe is an enormous influence for good in the United Kingdom. In terms of economics, 3 million jobs rely on trade with the European Union. On co-operation and trying to create a stronger force positively to put the case for Europe, I look forward to any ideas that the right hon. Gentleman may have on the specifics.

Sandra Osborne (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): How confident is the Minister that a line can be drawn under constant institutional change once the reform treaty is agreed, given that some of our European partners are far more passionate about continual institutional change than the UK?

Mr. Murphy: We live in hope that the endless cycle of conversation about continuous structural change can come to an end as a consequence of the agreement of this treaty. Enormous issues and challenges lie ahead for the European Union, and I am determined—the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are absolutely determined—to move Europe away from the constant introversion of looking at the important detail of structures and on to the issues that really matter to my hon. Friend's constituents in Ayrshire and people across the United Kingdom.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House welcome the Minister's support for the extension of the powers of national Parliaments. Will the Minister take that one stage further and explain throughout the country that parliamentary sovereignty means that we vote in this House about these matters, as the noble Baroness Thatcher said in debating the whole issue of the single market, and that in this country we do not take the foreign concept of a referendum?

Mr. Murphy: Although I rarely agree with the noble Baroness Thatcher, I nevertheless agree with the right hon. Gentleman's observation. I hope that Conservative Front Benchers and Conservative Members around him—he is in a minority of perhaps two or three—listen to his wise and candid advice.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): In welcoming the White Paper, which has much to commend it, I am intrigued by the four UK Government pre-conditions listed in chapter 3, including the

"protection of the UK's common law system."

which is a sloppy and embarrassing drafting error that will find no friends in the Scots legal system. May I draw the Minister's attention to concerns in Scotland about the previous draft constitution and the inclusion of the common fisheries policy as an exclusive competence? Will he continue the recent discussions between the UK and Scottish Governments to ensure the appropriate IGC conclusions for all the nations of the UK and the European Union?

Mr. Murphy: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, because, as he knows, we have signed a memorandum of understanding with the devolved Administrations to ensure that, where possible, we have a coherent approach across the United Kingdom. I look forward to discussing the precise details with him.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I shall be campaigning strongly for a referendum and believe that my view is shared by millions of Labour supporters and trade unionists throughout Britain. My hon. Friend has talked about making the European Union more transparent and more democratic, yet the European Council meets in secret, has no minutes and simply adopts conclusions drawn up by bureaucrats. Is my hon. Friend going to try to make the European Council more democratic?

Mr. Murphy: I could not hear every detail of my hon. Friend's comments, such is the attraction of our conversation about the European treaty—this statement is so popular, that the House is becoming busier with every passing question. I look forward to continuing the dialogue and have not given up all hope of convincing my hon. Friend of the error of his ways.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given the importance of the red lines to the whole country, will this different Government go to the IGC and say that this country must have an unambiguous veto written in on all those issues, because, as the Minister knows, that is the only way in which to protect those positions?

Mr. Murphy: As I have said, we will not accept any important transfer of sovereignty away from the United Kingdom. The right hon. Gentleman voted against a referendum on Maastricht, which was much more substantial than this treaty. I can do no more than quote him:

"If we sign the Amsterdam Treaty, we will abolish our country."

He was wrong then, and he is wrong now.

Mr. Greg Hands (Hammersmith and Fulham) (Con): May I ask the Minister again about the charter of fundamental rights? Ten days ago, Margot Wallström, the vice-president of the European Commission, appeared before the European Scrutiny Committee, where on our opt-out on the charter of fundamental rights she said:

"normally the opt-outs are respected—but I will not prejudge or speculate on what the Court of Justice will decide on fundamental rights and how this is applied throughout the European Union."

If the Commission itself does not think that the opt-out is watertight, will he tell us why he does?

Mr. Murphy: There is a straightforward answer to that. It is called the IGC mandate, article 1 of which states:

"the Charter does not extend the ability of the Court of Justice, or any court or tribunal of the United Kingdom, to find that the laws, regulations or administrative provisions, practices or action of the United Kingdom are inconsistent with the fundamental rights, freedoms and principles that it reaffirms."

In my three weeks in this job, I have learned an entirely new vocabulary—some would say a different language—but the important protections and rights that the UK enjoys are very clear in any language.

Members Sworn

The following Members made the Affirmation required by law:

Virendra Kumar Sharma Esq., for Ealing, Southall

Philip Wilson Esq., for Sedgefield

Point of Order

6.1 pm

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Mr. Speaker, could you advise me of what procedure there is, when a Member of this House has been responsible for activities which have cost the public £1 million, for bringing him here on a charge of wasting police time?

Mr. Speaker: That is certainly not a matter for me.

Standards and Privileges

Mr. Speaker: Before I invite the Government to move the motion relating to the report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, I wish to remind the House that references to all right hon. and hon. Members should be in proper parliamentary language. The Chair will offer the customary protection to all Members, in particular the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway), in the course of this debate.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House—

(i) approves the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (House of Commons Paper No. 909); and

(ii) accordingly suspends Mr George Galloway, Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, from the service of the House from Monday 8th October for a period of eighteen sitting days; and in calculating that period paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 12 (House not to sit on certain Fridays) shall not apply.—*[Mr. Michael Foster.]*

6.2 pm

Mr. George Galloway (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Respect): I am grateful, Mr. Speaker, for your earlier remarks.

I want to begin by apologising to the House for the fact that the important business that was transacted before we came to this matter necessarily had to be truncated because this is going to be a significant piece of business that must finish at 10 o'clock. Thus hon. Members who wished to speak on the devastating flooding that is inundating their constituencies were not called or had to be more succinct than they would have preferred. The great issue of public housing, which is the flagship of the new Labour Prime Minister's first term—at least I hope it is his first term—had to be dealt with in a very perfunctory manner because of the other business that awaited. We have dealt with the important issue of intergovernmental relations within the European Union. We have had the happy occasion of the entry into the House of two new Members, just as one long-serving Member is about to go out the door. It just goes to show that as one door opens another one shuts.

I apologise for the fact that after this mighty labour, which has brought forth really quite a little mouse, we now have to spend four hours, as we shall, discussing this matter. There was no trace of irony in the report. I suspect that that is because British baronets do not do irony, or at least not very well, and that there will not be much trace of irony in the speech that is to follow mine. Once the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards had decided, as he said not once but six times in his report, that, in the course of a four-year investigation described by the Committee as being of unprecedented length and complexity, he had found no evidence of any personal gain by me, this whole story became a dispute about the funding of political campaigns. Being lectured by the current House of Commons on the funding of political campaigns is like being accused of having bad taste by Donald Trump or being accused of slouching by the hunchback of Notre Dame. This House stands in utter ill repute on the question of the funding of political campaigns.

I shall develop that argument later. Suffice, for the moment, to say this. The police found a document with a list of secret lenders to the Labour party, every single one of whom was nominated either for a "K" or for what Lord Levy described as a "big P". This Parliament is stuffed full of political parties that were in turn stuffed full of secret loans and donations from millionaires or billionaires. None of the parties here—all three of them are culpable, a matter to which I shall return—ever asked the millionaires and billionaires who gave and lent them money where they got the money from. I am tempted to give just one example. Richard Desmond is a substantial benefactor to the Labour party. Did the treasurer of the Labour party ask Richard Desmond from which part of his considerable wealth he was donating handsomely to new Labour's coffers? Did the treasurer of the Labour party—I apologise to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for the language that I am about to use—ask if Mr. Desmond was giving from the profits of "Spunk-Loving Sluts", "Asian Babes", XXX pornographic television, or the profits of the *Daily Star*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. As I said, I wish to give the hon. Gentleman as much leeway as I can, and I promised—of course I would do this for any hon. Member—to make sure that he has the protection of the Chair, but we are discussing the report of the Standards and Privileges Committee. The matters that he is raising at the moment are not relevant to that report, and he must come back to it.

Mr. Galloway: With respect, Mr. Speaker, they are highly relevant. It is a question of glass houses and people throwing stones. It is a question of a committee of politicians criticising me for political fundraising when they themselves are responsible for political fundraising on a gigantic scale, from the most dubious of sources, in which they never applied to themselves the standards that they seek to apply to me in this report. It is a question not of standards, but of double standards. The more worldly members of the Committee may know that it is now known as the double standards Committee—the double standards in defence of privileges Committee.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that all members of the Committee acted in good faith. They were nominated to that Committee by the House and conducted their affairs properly. There has been no complaint whatsoever about the way in which they have conducted their affairs. In no way can I tolerate any hon. Gentleman—I know that feelings are running high for the hon. Gentleman—saying that they indulge in double standards. They do not.

Mr. Galloway: Mr. Speaker, you say that there is no complaint whatsoever, but I have one, and I wish to lay it before the House and the country. It would surely be intolerable to forbid me to argue that the Committee has acted unjustly because of the notion—

Mr. Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman says that he feels that the Committee has acted unjustly, he is legitimately able to put that case, but to say that it indulges in double standards is to say that it is acting in dishonourable way. If, the hon. Gentleman says that he has not had justice, put that case. You are highly articulate and you are able to do so. I know that from the period of years that I have known you. I say to you that having a complaint against the Committee is one thing, but you are entitled to say that you have not had justice without attacking the good character of any Committee member.

Mr. Galloway: I am really in a bit of a difficulty here. If I am saying that I have not had justice, that means I have been treated unjustly. How can I argue that I have been treated unjustly without alluding to the fact—

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can put the case that he felt that he was treated unjustly; I understand that. It is for the House to decide after this debate finishes whether it feels that the strength of argument is with the hon. Gentleman or with the Committee.

Mr. Galloway: Indeed, and I am just 10 minutes into what I am afraid is going to be a long speech, which has now been regularly interrupted by a teasing out of what is in order and what is not. I assure you, Mr. Speaker, that there is considerable interest in this debate in the country, and I do not think that the country would consider it had been well served by the House of Commons if a Member who is about to be thrown out was not allowed to proceed with an argument against that—one which he had come here to make. I appeal to your spirit of generosity, because it will not be possible for me to make the case that I have been treated unjustly without criticising the way that I have been treated. I know that the notion is that we are all honourable Members here, but I am accused of being dishonourable, and it is not possible for me to defend myself without dealing with the way in which I have been treated. I hope that I will be able to make my case—always, of course, at your direction, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker knows how much I respect him personally. I respect Parliament. Having spent 20 years in Parliament, and having been five times elected to Parliament, I consider the words "Member of Parliament" to be the most honourable appellation that it is possible to wear in this country. I respect the fact that I have been elected to Parliament five times—always against the odds—from the beginning, when I defeated the now-deceased Lord Jenkins, right through to the last occasion, on which I became the first Member of Parliament in England to be elected from the left of Labour for 60 years.

I respect Parliament. I respect the Select Committees of Parliament, even though I never managed to catch your eye, Mr. Speaker, or that of any other previous Speaker, in order to be appointed to one. Despite my areas of expertise, I never reached those pinnacles. I respect the Standards and Privileges Committee, but that does not mean that I can honestly tell you that I respect every person currently in the Parliament. It cannot mean that I respect every decision made by a Select Committee. It cannot mean that I must respect the findings of this Committee, which I consider—and I am not alone in this—to be unjust. When considered as a whole, it is an example not of standards, but of double standards, and not of privilege, but the defence of the privileged. That is the case I want to make this evening.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman can help us; I shall try to put this neutrally. The report suggests that the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied with the Committee, and believes that it is a politicised tribunal, but I understand from the report that he has no objection about the commissioner for standards, or his judgment, process and conclusion. Is that a fair representation of the hon. Gentleman's views?

Mr. Galloway: Alas, no. In fact, the opposite is the case. My complaints against the commissioner are even more trenchant than the complaints I intend to adduce against the Committee. If hon. Members will allow me to proceed with my case, I think that they will find some justice in what I have to say. I am accused in the Committee's report—indeed, I am sentenced by the Committee to 18 days' suspension—precisely because of the way I have conducted my defence against the accusations made. It says that in black and white. Rather surprisingly and sensitively, it states that if it were not for the way I had conducted my defence, I would merely have been asked to apologise to the House. I am being suspended for 18 days because of the way I conducted my defence. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, it has caused you some anxieties already this evening.

I want to make the case in my speech, which I warn the House will necessarily be a long one, for the reasons why I conducted my defence in the way that I did. I shall begin, if I may, with my criticism of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Sir Philip Mawer, who, in one of the delicious ironies—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am very reluctant to keep interrupting the hon. Gentleman. In these situations, I usually leave hon. Members who have had an accusation made against them to develop their case, but I could put it to the hon. Gentleman and the House that there is a long tradition of not attacking individuals, such as Officers of the House, who are not able to defend themselves. I remind the House that good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language.

Mr. Galloway: Mr. Speaker, this is now beginning to verge on the ridiculous. I say again that there are many people watching this debate this evening who would like to hear my defence against the charges of the standards commissioner, and the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Although you do so in the gentlest way, Mr. Speaker, if you are to come over the ball at me every time I make a couple of yards advance in my argument, we will really get nowhere. I cannot criticise the conduct of the inquiry without criticising the conduct of the person who conducted it. I shall try to do so as temperately as I can, but it will be seen as an attempt to gag me—as an attempt to silence me.

Mr. Speaker: I have known the hon. Gentleman for 30 years, and I do not think that I have the power to silence him. I do not think I have been able to do that. All I am saying is that the House has given me a set of rules that I must abide by, and see that they are enforced. It is not an attempt to gag the hon. Gentleman, but he must abide by the rules that Parliament has given me. I am the custodian of the rules, even in a situation such as this.

Mr. Galloway: Mr. Speaker, Dr. David Kelly was a civil servant who could not defend himself, and look what happened to him. Are we really saying that an important official of the British state, who has conducted a four-year inquiry into me, cannot be criticised because of the position that he holds? That will not seem tenable to the public in the country. It might pass muster here, although not, I suspect, with everyone, but it surely cannot be the case that I cannot develop my criticism of the commissioner's inquiry into me, because I am gagged as far as mentioning the commissioner—the man who carried out the inquiry.

I am sorry that those things are causing you difficulties, Mr. Speaker, but I am now 18 minutes into my speech and have barely been able to get started with the critique that I want to make of the way in which I have been treated. I am, after all, being excluded from Parliament. It is not a small thing. I am, after all, about to face the situation in which my constituents' Member of Parliament is banished from the building—a building in which I have sat for 20 years. I really would like to explain why I believe that I have been treated unjustly. I promise that the public will not understand the attempt to shield people from criticism, when I am the one who is being excluded from Parliament.

If I may continue; in one of life's delicious little ironies, the parliamentary commissioner turns out—I am grateful to *The Daily Telegraph* for this—to have once been the principal private secretary of the present Lord Hurd, who, in the 1980s, sat on the sofa with Saddam Hussein, helping to facilitate, as you will remember, Mr. Speaker, having been here with me, the supergun. Remember it—the arms to Iraq affair? That was the period in which the British Government were best friends with Saddam Hussein and I was outside the Iraqi embassy in London, demonstrating for human rights and democracy. That was the first of the ironies, but it is not the last.

The commissioner is commended in the report for the assiduous way in which he conducted his inquiry, but yesterday we could discover in *The Guardian* that Mr. Andrew Murray, the chairman of the Stop the War coalition, which organised the massive demonstrations of millions of people in London, and the communications officer of Britain's mightiest union, UNITE, which was formed through the merger of the engineers' union and the Transport and General Workers Union, of which I had the honour to be a member in good standing for 33 years—a very considerable figure in the land—was not interviewed by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. That was despite the fact that he was a founder of the Mariam appeal, an officer of the Mariam appeal and a trustee of the Mariam appeal. He was never interviewed by the commissioner, who either interviewed or sought to interview every other person who held such positions. Why did he not interview Andrew Murray as part of his inquiry, which was so assiduous, long and complex? Was it because Mr. Murray would have been able, as he did in *The Guardian*, to set him right about a few things? I believe that that was the reason. The only alternative reason is incompetence, inefficiency and inattention to detail. I am sure that you would not like me to draw that conclusion, Mr. Speaker.

I fell out badly with the parliamentary commissioner—very badly. I am going to develop the reasons why, and when I have finished, even if they cannot say so, many hon. Members will be sympathetic to the position in

which I found myself. I fell out with the parliamentary commissioner when I read the transcript showing how he fawned on one of the witnesses, Mr. Tony Zureikat—about whom much more later. I am attacked in the report for having criticised Tony Zureikat as a malevolent fantasist. When I have finished bringing to the attention of the House what Mr. Zureikat said, which I demonstrated beyond contradiction to be lies, hon. Members will understand why I described him as a malevolent fantasist. Yet one of the reasons I am being suspended this evening is that I so robustly pursued his lies, and debunked them, to the point that every time I debunked a lie the witness was described by the commissioner more and more as peripheral. "Peripheral" was the word that he used; but it turns out in the end that such witnesses—and there are more—were not peripheral, because they were used as corroborators of the central charge against me, on the subject of the political funding of the Mariam appeal campaign.

Even more seriously, I fell out with the parliamentary commissioner over the missing part of the transcript of my discussion with him. It turns out that I was right about that, at least if I read correctly the feint—the sleight-of-hand—reference to it in the report. Let me tell you, Sir, what happened. In my meeting with the parliamentary commissioner, the subject of the so-called minute of my meeting with Saddam Hussein in August 2003 was being discussed. I asked for the provenance of that minute. Miss Alda Barry, a civil servant of unimpeachable integrity, whom I have known in this House for 20 years, said that apparently there was a tape recording of the meeting. Yet when I received the transcript there was no reference to a tape recording of the meeting in it. I asked the commissioner over and over again why the reference was not in the transcript. "Why don't you ask," I said, "Miss Barry, a person of unimpeachable honesty, whether she said it, and if she tells you that she said it, why don't you now insert it into the transcript?" Answer came there none. So far as I am aware, Miss Barry was never asked whether she had said what I know she said, what she knows she said, and what the commissioner must know she said. Why was that not in the transcript? I suspect that it was not there because it was not convenient, because there was and is no tape recording. Therefore it was highly inconvenient for a senior civil servant like her to have said that there might be a tape recording of the meeting.

There is much more of that in the report, when we get to it, but I ask hon. Members honestly to reflect: if something important had been said at a meeting with the parliamentary commissioner where you were the accused, but it was not in the transcript despite your repeatedly asking—accepting that stenographers can make mistakes—that the person who said it should be asked whether she said it, and, if she did, that it should be inserted in the transcript, how would you feel about the person responsible for the omission? I suspect that you would be as angry about it as I am. Yet, as I have said, in the final report it is acknowledged that Miss Barry made the comment—but by sleight of hand, so as in no way to exculpate me of my criticism of the commissioner for its omission. The Committee wants to have its cake and eat it: to set the record straight with an en passant remark that would, if I had not adverted to it this evening, not even have been noticed, but still to condemn me for criticising the commissioner who left the remark out in the first place.

Even more serious is this: the commissioner said to me, "There was an employee of the Mariam appeal by the name of E. Laing. She was paid £13,000. Do you know who she was?" I said, "No. I have no idea. I've never heard of E. Laing". "Let me put to you", he said, "the suggestion"—although allegation would have been the correct English word, because the suggestion of an illegal act is an allegation—"that E. Laing is your former wife, Elaine Galloway", who happens to be a respected civil servant working in Her Majesty's Treasury across the road. The point was that the name "E. Laing" on a cheque could easily be altered to the name "Elaine Galloway". In other words, the suggestion was that she and I had been involved in what can only be described as a criminal conspiracy to defraud of £13,000.

When I asked the commissioner who made that suggestion, he said, "I have forgotten". I ask you, Mr. Speaker, and every Member here to search their hearts on this. Does anyone really believe that a Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards involved in a four-year investigation of a Member of Parliament can hear a suggestion of criminal behaviour against that Member of Parliament and then forget who made that suggestion? I put it to you that it is impossible that he forgot the person who made that allegation. Only if he was a bungling nincompoop could he have forgotten who made that suggestion or, more properly, allegation. I am sure that you would pull me up if I were to describe Sir Philip as a bungling nincompoop, Mr. Speaker.

It turned out that E. Laing was the personal assistant of the director of the Mariam appeal, who told the commissioner that he did not know who E. Laing was—I will come to that later. It turned out that E. Laing was paid, perfectly properly, by the director of the Mariam appeal as his personal assistant, but that that was just not the name by which she was commonly known.

Did the commissioner apologise to me for the suggestion that I had been involved in a criminal fraud? No. Was I irredeemably angry with the commissioner about the episode thereafter? Yes I was, and so would any of you be. If any of you were asked such a question—if any of you were implicitly accused so unjustly and in such a way—you would be as angry about the person who made the allegation as I was. You would be even angrier when he did not have the courage to tell you either who made the suggestion or that he could not have told you the name. That would have been perfectly acceptable. If he had said, "Well I'm not able to divulge the identity of the person who made the suggestion", that would have been a perfectly defensible position. But to claim that he had forgotten who made the suggestion made me very angry indeed.

The commissioner also ambushed me with documents. He had had two days notice of them before my meeting with the Committee, but he sprung them on me at the meeting in a coup de théâtre—his Perry Mason moment. That made me angry, too.

Even more serious than anything that I have said so far, however, is that the commissioner claimed that he was involved in an inquisitorial rather than an adversarial inquiry; and yet he refused point blank, over and over again—a refusal endorsed by the Committee—to pursue the existence of forged documents about me that emerged in Baghdad in the very same week and in the very same city, and which passed through the hands of a journalist

[Mr. Galloway]

from the very same newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*. I refer to the forged documents published by *The Christian Science Monitor* and almost published by *The Mail on Sunday* in England. By the way, Mr. Speaker, those documents looked really authentic. They were on proper headed notepaper, with the right margins and the right terms, and were written in the correct style and signed by the correct people. The documents even almost got it right about my whereabouts vis-à-vis Iraq, on the dates that they suggested that I had gone to lift $20 million personally in cash, corruptly, given to me by two sons of Saddam Hussein. Those documents were very plausible and convincing. They emerged in the same week, in the same city, in the hands of the same newspaper—*The Daily Telegraph*—that published the infamous stories about me.

Not only that, but the identity of the man who gave the documents to *The Christian Science Monitor* and to *The Mail on Sunday* is known. His picture was in the paper and his address is known to our men in Baghdad in the embassy. The commissioner steadfastly refused to inquire as to why that general had either constructed those forgeries himself or passed them on to newspapers and on to Philip Smucker, the journalist concerned—a *Daily Telegraph* stringer who worked also for *The Christian Science Monitor*.

I asked the commissioner to send our people from the embassy to interview that general and ask him on whose behalf those forgeries had been produced and why that had been done. The commissioner said that he would not do so, because those forged documents were not in the complaint filed by the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), even though the same commissioner went on, for almost four years, to examine and inquire into practically everything other than Mr. Blaby's complaint.

I said, "It must be relevant that forgeries about me were produced". We know that they were forgeries. The newspapers concerned accepted that they were forgeries. Harvard university tested the ink on the documents and proved that they there forgeries. That was possible in the case of those documents because, unlike *The Daily Telegraph* documents, to which I shall return, they were original documents and not photocopies or, later, faxes. It is inconceivable that a man carrying out an inquisitorial examination of such an important affair would not even try to find out who was responsible for the forgeries against a Member of this House. In fact, it is inconceivable to me that when those forgeries were exposed such a man would not have wanted to know why a Member of this House was the victim of such a conspiracy.

It is sometimes said, and was said by members of the Committee—I hear them saying it now, sotto voce—"Oh, as far as you're concerned it's just a big conspiracy". But we know that there was a conspiracy. It is not an allegation by me—we know that there was a conspiracy. The documents were published in *The Christian Science Monitor* and almost elsewhere—I stopped the presses at the last possible minute, only by giving my passports to the editor of *The Mail on Sunday*, for which I then worked, to prove that I could not have been in Iraq on some of the dates on which it was suggested I had lifted that money.

It is inconceivable that anyone carrying out an inquisitorial investigation would not seek to investigate examples of parallel behaviour, yet the commissioner refused to do so on the utterly fatuous ground that they were not covered by the complaints made by the hon. Member for Blaby. He clung to the credibility of witnesses whom I have proven to be telling lies. He accused me in his report of not co-operating, yet Members who can bear to do so can go through his correspondence with me and not find a single trace of unhappiness on his part about the level of my co-operation. Indeed, as late as the end of last year, he was thanking me, and he was not just grateful, he was "very grateful" for the way in which I was co-operating with him. The truth is that, because they found no evidence of personal gain by me, they switched the goalposts and made an attack on my conduct in defending myself too successfully through the course of this inquiry, driving liars' evidence to the periphery, where they now claim that it rests.

The commissioner claimed that there was a discrepancy in my account in *The Mail on Sunday* of my meeting with Saddam Hussein in August 2003. He had to drop that, once I had drawn to his attention my book, which I had given him on the date of publication, in which I laid out exactly the circumstances of who was present and who was not at my meeting with Saddam Hussein. However, he claimed that there was a discrepancy that never was.

The commissioner even said that there was a discrepancy in my attitude to the *Telegraph* documents, to which I shall return—I told you this was going to have to be a long speech. Those documents were never an issue in the libel case against *The Daily Telegraph*. Throughout, the commissioner had more faith in *The Daily Telegraph*'s documents than *The Daily Telegraph* did. If *The Daily Telegraph* had had any confidence in its photocopied documents, it would have made them its defence in the trial, but it did not do so because it knew that that would fail. There is no discrepancy at all in how I have described those documents. I said at the time, and I still say now, that those documents are either forgeries or an example of someone corruptly doing business in Iraq behind my back, without my knowledge and using my name. I say, as I said on the first day, that there is no discrepancy here. I said on the first day that, whatever the case, whoever produced the documents, whenever they produced them and for whatever reason, the information in them is false. There is no discrepancy in that at all.

Simon Hughes: One of the issues that came up during the investigation, which I had not known before, was that there was a power for the hon. Gentleman to ask that the commissioner should not investigate alone before the matter went to the Committee, and that an investigatory panel comprising the commissioner, a lawyer and a senior Member of the House should do the job, possibly to give a bit more authority to the investigation. Will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he considered using that process and, if he did, why he rejected it? It seems to me that it would have been a worthwhile initiative for him to take, because it would have brought some independence from this building to the investigation.

Mr. Galloway: That is exactly the point to which I shall now turn. In fact, the power to do that lies with the commissioner, who may do it, or with the Committee. If the Committee asks the commissioner to

do that, he must do it. There is no power on my part to insist on such a panel. Perhaps there ought to be.

As I said at the beginning, I am being suspended for 18 days, and the Committee has singled this issue out because I described it as a politicised tribunal. Of course it is a politicised tribunal. How could it be anything other, when it is composed of politicians? It is po-faced, pompous and preposterous to ask the public to believe—as the Chairman of the Committee asked me to believe—that the individual politicians on the Committee leave their politics at the door. That flies in the face of everything that we know about ourselves, and of all the history of the existence of this Committee—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members shake their heads. I shall have to educate them with some recent examples. Perhaps they were not here at the time. My problem is that I have been here for a long time and have an elephantine memory. I remember when the very considerable brain of Mr. Willetts—forgive me, I forget his constituency—[Hon. Members: "Havant"] I remember when the very considerable brain of Mr. Havant, when he was a Government Whip, revealed that the Tory Members of the Standards and Privileges Committee had wanted the Whips' advice. Because he is so clever, his defence was: "No, it was not that they wanted our advice. They were in want of our advice as they proceeded with the business in front of them."

Then there is the matter of the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid) and the former Member for Cathcart, our old friend, now Lord Maxton. They appeared in front of this politicised tribunal, but they were lucky. The politicised tribunal trying their case threw out the parliamentary commissioner's findings using the ingenious device of changing the burden of proof that should have been applied to the allegations against them. That parliamentary commissioner, Miss Filkin, then got the sack for having had the temerity to take on the powerful. I predict that the current commissioner will not get the sack. In fact, he has just been promoted. I do not know where you go from being a knight of the realm; perhaps he can get elevated to the House of Lords without having to make a campaign contribution. But Miss Filkin got the sack because she prosecuted the case against the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts and the former Member for Cathcart in a way that the politicised tribunal of Members of Parliament did not like, and every person in here knows that that is true.

Even if the Committee were composed of saints—we will see in a minute just how short of sainthood some of them are—they would, by definition, be party political saints. I had no friends on the Committee. I am the sole Member of Parliament for my party. I said that this was a politicised tribunal, Mr. Speaker, and you know that I mean it when I say it. I swear before God that this is true: I made the comment about this politicised tribunal before I had even looked to see who the members of the tribunal were. Once I knew who they were—

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Galloway: I am being ambushed! You crept up behind me. I am coming to you in a minute.

Mr. Robathan: There is an issue here, because I understand that a conspiracy is afoot. Will the hon. Gentleman just tell me whether I am part of that conspiracy, as I would really like to know?

Mr. Galloway: I am coming to you in just a minute—not you, of course, Mr. Speaker. I suppose I have to call him the hon. Gentleman—he has sneaked up on me. *[Interruption.]* You were sitting over there the last time I looked. I warn the hon. Gentleman that just because there is a lot of him and not many of me, he need not think I am outnumbered. Short-sword fighting is my speciality—believe me. I never made it into the armed forces, but I can handle the hon. Member for Blaby. No one should worry about that.

Once I looked at who was on the Committee on Standards and Privileges, I could not believe my eyes. The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) was one of them—a fanatical supporter of Israel, against which I have fought all my political life. Is it really true that he left his politics at the door when he was judging me? Does anybody really believe that?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that on many occasions Members have had to gather together to look at a case independently and when they do so, they leave their private and political views behind them. Whatever organisation the hon. Member for Hendon supports is irrelevant. The hon. Gentleman seems to be encroaching on saying that there was motivation other than the evidence of the case being put before the Committee. The hon. Gentleman cannot say that because the hon. Member for Hendon is a supporter of the state of Israel, he did not give a fair hearing to the case, based on the evidence put before him.

Mr. Galloway: Why can I not say that if that is what I believe? Why can I not say that I believe I was treated unjustly by this Committee and provide the reasons why that is the case?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will tell the hon. Gentleman why. In a less heated situation, I would not allow anyone to attack the honour of an hon. Member—and I cannot allow it in this situation either. The support that the hon. Member for Hendon gives to the state of Israel or any other political view he expresses is perfectly legitimate: he is quite entitled to hear a case on the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Mr. Galloway: The point I am trying to make, Mr. Speaker, is that the Chairman's claim that members of the Committee leave their politics at the door is unsustainable. I can tell you that the hon. Member for Hendon used to heckle me when I was making speeches on his own side. He used to heckle me during my speeches, even though we were members of the same party. In any sane system—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have known many members of the same party to heckle the hon. Gentleman. I have already said that I have known him for 30 years. That is what happens—and the hon. Member for Hendon is not alone in that respect. The hon. Gentleman has questioned his motives, but the hon. Member for Hendon is an hon. Member who is entitled to sit on a

[Mr. Speaker]

Committee that takes evidence—it is an evidence-taking Committee—and he would do so in an impartial manner.

Mr. Galloway: Well, that may be true in theory; but it is my case that it is not true in practice—and it could not be so, because we are politicians. It is not credible—I mean literally incredible and it will be seen by the public as incredible—that this Committee will deal impartially with someone who is regarded, particularly on the Labour side, as a heretic and who was expelled from the Labour party for political reasons and who leads a party whose councillors took seats from the Labour party. Indeed, I defeated the Labour party in an electoral campaign into which the Labour party threw everything, including the kitchen sink. The Labour party is much preoccupied with which Labour Minister I am going to stand against at the next election. All I can tell you is that he is in the building right now. The idea that Labour people could be unbiased about me in all those circumstances is ridiculous. It is true only in theory, Mr. Speaker, that someone who is as passionately in favour of Israel as I am against it would leave their politics at the door.

Another example is the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), with whom I battled for years regarding his role, in tandem with Robert Maxwell, in the setting up and smearing of Arthur Scargill—president of the union of which I am an honorary member and the right hon. Gentleman is an expelled member. The idea that all that would be left at the door is ridiculous. When Tam Dalyell and I were trying to expose Roger Windsor, the British intelligence agent in Arthur Scargill's office during the attempt to smear him, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley was Maxwell's man, who could be found here actually selling books at half price from his parliamentary office. The idea that he could be—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is going too far. *[Interruption.]* Order. The noise in the Chamber does not help when I am trying to speak to these matters. The hon. Gentleman is making personal attacks on members of the Committee. That is wrong and I cannot allow it. The hon. Gentleman may complain that I have interfered too much, but I promise that I will not interfere again if he gets back to the report before us, rather than the personalities of individual members of the Committee.

Mr. Galloway: But on the subject of personal attacks, Mr. Speaker, I am the one who is being personally attacked and I am only trying to defend myself.

Mr. Speaker: Order. What I am seeking to do is to help the hon. Gentleman. If he feels that he is being attacked, it is via this report. If he speaks to the report and rebuts it, I can assist him in every way, but attacking hon. Gentlemen on the basis of who they are connected with or what books they are promoting is something that I cannot allow. If the hon. Gentleman intends to go through every individual member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges and do the same thing, let me tell him that I cannot allow it.

Mr. Galloway: Of course, I hear what you say, Mr. Speaker. Having dealt with the hon. Member for Hendon and the right hon. Member for Rother Valley, I will leave this line of argument—or particular seam that I have been mining—at that. I think that the public know the truth about these issues and if they do not, they can read Seamus Milne's masterpiece, "The Enemy Within", about the miners' dispute, who was who and who did what in it. I have been a proud member of the National Union of Mineworkers—south Wales area, Mardy lodge—these last 25 years. I am very proud of that, which is one of the reasons why the right hon. Member for Rother Valley and I do not get along very well.

A politicised tribunal is what I say it was, Mr. Speaker. If it were not a politicised tribunal, why did I learn of its establishment from the media rather than from the parliamentary commissioner or the Member who made the complaint? That Member was on my left a few minutes ago, but he has now disappeared. I predict that he will pop up somewhere over there any minute now. I hope so, at least, as I have much to say about him.

I learned of the existence of this inquiry from the media and I learned of its conclusions from the media. I did not need to wait for the Chairman's report, which was published on the Tuesday, because I read it on the front page of *The Sunday Times* on the Sunday. Given the closeness of new Labour to Mr. Murdoch and *The Sunday Times*—the sewer of choice for so many such things—I knew that it must be true.

Apparently, it is not a politicised tribunal, but a Committee on Standards and Privileges, yet it is so unconcerned about the breach of privilege implicit in that lack of standards that an hon. Member being inquired into learns of his fate from the newspapers. When I wrote to the Chairman complaining about the leak, he answered me without even referring to that leak, so unconcerned was he at that fact that his Committee of non-politicians, his unpolitical campaign, his depoliticised Committee leaked the conclusions of this inquiry to *The Sunday Times* before it had time to publish the report. And you ask me to believe that that is not politically motivated! Mr. Speaker, what other motivation could there have been for these 10 pristine Gentlemen, as I must now refer to them—what reason could there have been for one or more of these 10 paragons of virtue and honour—leaking the conclusion of this report, other than a political reason?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I know that it is difficult for the hon. Gentleman, but once again he is questioning the honour of members of our Standards and Privileges Committee and makes an accusation that a leak came from one of them. That is not necessarily the case. My experience in Parliament is that many, many people have their eyes on documents. What I am trying to say is that it could go beyond the members of the Committee. I am not making any accusations, but the situation of the leak, which I deprecate, does not allow the hon. Gentleman to question the honour of the individual members of our Committee.

Mr. Galloway: Mr. Speaker, you began these proceedings by saying that you would protect me, but every time you have been on your feet it has been to protect the

Committee or the Parliamentary Commissioner. If I had said that the leak had come from a civil servant, you would, on the basis of your previous intervention, have told me that I must not impugn the integrity of a civil servant. Now that I am saying that I believe the leak came—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The best thing that the hon. Gentleman can do is not to seek to twist the words that I have used. I am in a difficult situation today, and I am trying to help and assist the hon. Gentleman to put his case, but he must abide by the rules that I have been given. He cannot question my judgment on the case that I put—that the motivation of hon. Members of this House should not be questioned in the way that he is questioning it.

Mr. Galloway: I am really at a loss, Mr. Speaker. The report was leaked on the front page of *The Sunday Times*: ergo, somebody leaked it. Based on what you have said, I may not impugn the integrity of a civil servant and I must not allege that one of the Committee members leaked it. That only leaves the printers. Is it all right to impugn their integrity? I tell you candidly: not only do I believe—not only does any sensible person believe—that it was neither the printers nor the civil servants who leaked it, but I believe that it was leaked for political reasons by a Committee that you are asking me to accept is non-political.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have to give a warning to the hon. Gentleman. He is defying my ruling and is very close to being named. This I do not want to do, but this is what he is doing: he is defying my ruling, and he will be named if he wishes, as he says, to seek to mine this particular seam. I urge him not to do so, to move on and to get back to the report.

Mr. Galloway: Of course I must obey your ruling, Mr. Speaker, because I do not want to be named because I do not want to be thrown out of the House an hour or two before I am going to be thrown out of the House anyway. We all know that that is what is going to happen.

I said that I was a short-sword fighter, but I am a short-sword fighter in Spartacus's army. It is Caesar's legions gathered here tonight who are going to expel me from the House. Everybody knows that that is true. Everybody knows that I am going to be expelled from the House this evening—*[Interruption.]* Some say, "Get on with it." I am trying to get on with my case, but I am not having as much success with this audience as I suspect I may be having beyond these walls—

Mr. Robathan: I doubt it.

Mr. Galloway: I have spent 10 hours on live phone-in radio this week, in front of hundreds of thousands of listeners—*[Interruption.]* My pay is in the Register of Members' Interests—I thought the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) was a friend of mine; it appears that he has joined the legions.

There were 10 hours of live radio, with hundreds of thousands of listeners, and I am here to tell you, in case you do not know, Mr. Speaker, that this report has sunk like a stone and has no credibility among the general public. It is popular in here, I can tell, but it has no credibility among the general public, in part because they suspect that which I am trying to prove to them, if I am able to develop my case.

I am not able to say who leaked the report, Mr. Speaker, because of your ruling and your threat to name me, so I can only say this: it was leaked. I wrote to the Chairman of the Committee complaining about the leak. He replied to me without reference to the fact that it had been leaked. I then replied to him to say how outrageous it was that he had not even referred to the leak, at which point he wrote to me again saying, "I am instituting an inquiry into the leak." But of course the story was leaked on the Sunday before polling day in a by-election in which my party was a contestant.

I just ask you this, and ask you and other Members, Mr. Speaker, to answer it honestly in their hearts: would this Committee have published such a report against the leader of the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties two days before polling day in a by-election in London? Every one of you knows that it would not. A kind of freemasonry would apply, and we know about that, Mr. Speaker, you and me—*[Laughter.]* Of course we know it as victims, not as practitioners of those black arts; we know it as those who have been on the end of their discrimination and bigotry. Does anyone really believe that if this report had been about the leaders of the other parties represented on the Committee, it would have been published two days before polling day? You all know in your hearts that it would not, and it would not therefore have been leaked on the Sunday before polling day.

Now, Mr. Speaker, you will be glad to know that I intend to move on to the report. I warn the House that I have even more to say about that. I am going to start with—I suppose I must call him the hon. Gentleman—the hon. Member for Blaby, on my left, who is moving around the House on manoeuvres, you might say. It was the hon. Gentleman who made the complaint against me. I have here the letter with which he made the complaint:

> "Further to our telephone conversation this afternoon, I note that you have yet to receive a request to investigate the extremely serious allegations made by the Daily Telegraph against George Galloway MP.
>
> Since serving in the last Gulf war in 1991, I have been very interested in the situation in Iraq ever since"—

I apologise for his English. He is a soldier. I merely left school at 17, like you, Mr. Speaker, to go and work in a factory—

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) attended public school; you have got to excuse his English.

Mr. Galloway: Public school education can do that to your facility with the English language.

Mr. Robathan: Get on with it!

Mr. Galloway: No wonder he wants to draw a veil over this English, which is now enshrined for ever in the history of this Parliament.

The letter says:

> "Since serving in the last Gulf war"—

I cannot resist reading it again—

[Mr. Galloway]

"For a couple of years I was on the Board of Ann Clwyd's organisation "INDICT" and there met a lot of Iraqi opposition figures."

There are many new Members in the House, Mr. Speaker, so let me tell them about the organisation Indict. Indict was a political campaign to indict the former leaders of Iraq. It was foreign-funded to the tune of millions of dollars by the United States Government.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): That's all right, then.

Mr. Galloway: "That's all right, then," as the hon. Gentleman says. The organisation was funded to the tune of millions of dollars from the United States Government. The complainant was a member of it. There, he met a lot of Iraqi opposition figures. It operated from this House. Parliamentary facilities, I surmise, were used by its members—their offices and telephones. I do not know if the computer was invented then, but perhaps their faxes were used—and perfectly properly, as these were hon. Members engaged in a political campaign that happened to be foreign-funded to the tune of millions of dollars.

I am more interested in the Iraqi opposition figures that the hon. Gentleman met therein. Who might those Iraqi opposition figures have been? Let us speculate.

Mr. Robathan: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. For clarification, when I was a member of the board of Indict, we had premises somewhere in south Lambeth—I cannot remember exactly where—and it was—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order, but a matter for debate. The hon. Gentleman might catch my eye later—some time later, by the sound of it.

Mr. Galloway: The verbal facility of the hon. Member for Blaby is not even as good as his written facility.

I do not why anyone would want to deny it; everybody here knows that MPs use parliamentary resources for political campaigns. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase), whom I respect very much, sent me a document this week in the internal post every word of which I agree with, and which I wholeheartedly support, on the campaign against city academies. I hope I have not got him into trouble. Everybody in here knows that every Member involved in a political campaign uses parliamentary facilities in part, whether they have an office somewhere in south Lambeth or not.

Mr. Robathan: We did not.

Mr. Galloway: The hon. Gentleman says that they did not. Are we really expected to believe that he never once used the telephone, the photocopier, a meeting room or his own office in pursuit of his campaign?

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Galloway: The right hon. Lady shakes her head; that is even more extraordinary. She was the chairman of Indict. If she is going to claim that Indict never once used parliamentary facilities, I will risk being named by you, Mr. Speaker, because no one in their right mind could believe that the campaign that the right hon. Lady led for years never once used parliamentary facilities in pursuit of its objectives.

Ann Clwyd: I simply want to put the record straight. Indict was an organisation funded not just by the Americans but by other countries. Indict employed six, sometimes seven, full-time people and had an office directly across the river that was staffed throughout a seven-year period. I would ask the hon. Gentleman not to repeat that untruth; it was not run from the House of Commons.

Mr. Galloway: I am more grateful for that intervention than the right hon. Lady can imagine. It now turns out that the organisation of which the complainant was a member was funded not by one foreign country but by several, and so handsomely that it could afford to employ seven people in an office just across the river. How extraordinary that is.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I know that it is difficult for the hon. Gentleman, who is frowning. I have a difficult job this evening, but I say to him that it is one thing to mention an organisation in passing, but he is now entering into a full-blown debate about the organisation. We should get back to the report.

Mr. Galloway: This is a question of double standards. It is about the fact that I am being thrown out of the House for running a campaign about Iraq that sometimes used parliamentary facilities and was funded by foreigners. It is based on a complaint by a member of an organisation that campaigned about Iraq, undoubtedly used from time to time some parliamentary facilities, and was funded by not one but several foreign countries. That is my point: the double standards give rise to the injustice. I had not intended to spend as much time on the organisation Indict, but two members of it have intervened, which has expanded what I had to say on this subject.

My real point is not about Indict, but about the Iraqi opposition figures that the hon. Member for Blaby was hanging out with during his time across the river in Lambeth with the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) and Indict. Let us speculate on who these Iraqi opposition figures might be. Might they be the Iraqi opposition figures that put us into so much trouble in the run-up to the war? Might they be the Iraqi opposition figures who fabricated and forged their way into this House, the White House, Congress and Whitehall with their canards that have led us to the pass that we are in, and which we cannot avoid discussing this evening? Might they be the Iraqi opposition figures—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I know it is difficult for the hon. Gentleman to take a telling, but he must get back to the report. He is entering into the detail of an organisation called Indict and he is not allowed to do so. He must obey my ruling.

Mr. Galloway: So you keep saying; having told me you would protect me, we are now getting to the stage where you are going to have to throw me out of Parliament prematurely because—

The hon. Member, having wilfully disregarded the authority of the Chair, was named by MR. SPEAKER, *pursuant to Standing Order No. 43 (Disorderly conduct).*

Ordered,

That Mr. George Galloway be suspended from the service of the House—*[Ms Harman.]*

Question again proposed.

7.17 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): Let me begin by dispersing some of the smokescreen that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway) constructed as he sought to divert attention from the issue that is at the heart of the debate and that appears on the front of the report: the conduct of the hon. Gentleman.

Let me make one thing absolutely clear. As fellow parliamentarians, we defend absolutely the right of free speech. We said as much in our report; as far as we are concerned, the hon. Gentleman has the right to hold and express his views and use any legitimate means to pursue them. That applies as much to his views on sanctions as it does on anything else. He has stated that my Committee is pro-sanctions and pro-war. As a matter of fact, of the nine members who signed the report, five voted in favour of the war and four did not.

The hon. Gentleman further asserted that he is being suspended because he robustly defended himself. Not so. The problem with his defence was not that it was robust; it was that it was not credible. He has accused us of being a kangaroo court composed of his political opponents, incapable of reaching an objective conclusion. As an aside, one member of the Committee is a Welsh nationalist, a party that has no ambitions on Bethnal Green and Bow.

What the Committee does mind about is our duty to maintain the reputation of the House. Nothing could more damage that reputation than if a Committee of this House were to dispense summary justice in a partisan manner to settle political scores. None of us will be complicit in that, least of all—if I may say so, and without wishing to embarrass him—the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), who has a justified reputation for championing the causes of those who have been wrongly accused. It would, however, damage the House's reputation if we were to fail to uphold our own rules and code of conduct. We have addressed this case objectively and impartially—as we have addressed all cases since I became a Committee member.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow has asserted that since he has

"been cleared of taking a single penny or in any way personally benefiting from the former Iraqi regime"

the complaint should fail. What the commissioner actually said—and what the Committee endorsed—was that no evidence had emerged from the inquiry that shows whether the hon. Gentleman has

"directly and personally, unlawfully received monies from the former Iraqi regime".

The commissioner did, however, find clear evidence that his former wife, with whom he shared a joint account, had received two substantial sums from the oil for food programme.

Where the money for the Mariam appeal came from and where it ended up is of interest to the House. This is not a debate about party political funding, as the hon. Gentleman maintains. It is about openness, accountability and integrity, and it is also about our rules on advocacy. We know that the hon. Gentleman was, by his own admission, in charge of the Mariam campaign and that that was, in his words,

"a campaigning organisation campaigning for the lifting of sanctions against Iraq."

We know that it had total resources of £1.4 million, only a fraction of which was used for the treatment of Mariam herself. The central issue before us is: when the hon. Gentleman argued in this Chamber against sanctions on Iraq, did he know—and therefore was the House entitled to know—that the vehicle for that campaign was funded in part by Saddam Hussein? The evidence led us to the conclusion that the hon. Gentleman solicited the funds, was instrumental in securing them, directed their expenditure and was complicit in trying to conceal their true origin. Let me briefly explain how the commissioner and the Committee reached that conclusion.

I should first put on record our thanks to the commissioner for his painstaking work, and state that I bitterly resent the hon. Gentleman's gratuitous and offensive attack on him. This inquiry was the longest running, and probably one of the most complex, ever undertaken by any commissioner. A number of unusual features contributed to the complexity: the overlap with the interests of other bodies, such as the Volcker committee and the Charity Commission; the foreign dimension; the difficulty in authenticating documents; language issues; and unobtainable witnesses. I am also grateful to the Committee. It has discussed the case on five separate occasions for a total of between nine and 10 hours and has reached a unanimous conclusion.

At the heart of the debate are the so-called *Telegraph* documents. Their discovery led to the articles that gave rise to the complaint, and their authenticity and credibility was the key question we had to answer. What did the documents say? They are printed in full on pages 8 to 11 of volume II of the report, and I shall quote extracts referring to reports of meetings that concern the hon. Gentleman. First, the intelligence chief's memorandum says that the hon. Gentleman's

"projects and future plans for the benefit of the country need financial support to become a motive for him to do more work and because of the sensitivity of getting money directly from Iraq it is necessary to grant him oil contracts...his only representative on all matters relating to the Mariam Campaign is Mr. Fawaz Abdullah Zureikat and the two partners have agreed that financial and commercial matters should be done by"

Zureikat

"with emphasis that the name of Mr. Galloway or his wife should not be mentioned later...Therefore he needs continuous financial support from Iraq...he suggested to us the following...first increase his share of oil."

A later document, known as the Tariq Aziz memorandum, states:

"We send you attached a translation of the work programme for the year 2000 which was submitted by Member of Parliament George Galloway and cleared by the President's office".

A translation of the presidential response gives an order that the hon. Gentleman's request be studied:

"But the belief is that the person who is promoting the right path, even using western methods, needs exceptional support which we cannot afford."

[Sir George Young]

The final document is the Izzat Ibrahim document. It recommends:

"continuing the co-operation with George Galloway about the oil contracts and other commercial contracts…It is better not to engage the Mukhabarat"—

the Iraqi intelligence service—

"in the relationship with George Galloway, as he has been a well known politician since 1990 and discovery with the Mukhabarat would damage him very much."

If true, those documents have serious implications both for the hon. Gentleman and the House. My Committee and the commissioner have seen the documents in their entirety—all 2,500-plus pages of them. The hon. Gentleman has chosen not to do so, despite a range of opportunities during both the libel proceedings and our own inquiry.

The hon. Gentleman denounces the documents as fakes or forgeries. Let us examine that proposition. He asserts that some, or possibly all, of the *Telegraph* documents were not found in the burnt-out Foreign Ministry building in Baghdad, as the journalist David Blair described in sworn testimony during the libel proceedings and confirmed in evidence to the commissioner, and as has been independently confirmed by other witnesses. Instead, the hon. Gentleman asserts that they were handed to David Blair by agents of our intelligence service. On that scenario, those behind his alleged plot would have needed not only to have operated a shadow office over a period of some four years to create 2,500 documents of the wide-ranging appearance found by Mr. Blair, but also somehow to have stolen the various original documents in the files without arousing any suspicion from the Iraqi authorities who held them. This incredibly sophisticated, dangerous and expensive exercise would have been undertaken by the very agency whose energies at the time were primarily focused on a search to discover whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The House might agree that that seems to be a wholly disproportionate effort for our security forces to have expended to silence a Back Bencher, however troublesome.

The other proposition advanced by the hon. Gentleman is that the shadow office that produced the fakes or forgeries might have been run by someone within the then Iraqi regime, but that is even more far-fetched. Is it likely that at a time when the country faced the imminent threat of invasion so much resource would have been committed at the highest level to a plot using extraordinarily skilful forgery techniques, to bring down one of the few friends the then regime had—and a plot whose ultimate success, undertaken for motives never explained, depended on Mr. Blair or some other inquisitive journalist happening to come across the documents among a mass of files on the floor of one room in one specific Iraqi Government building following a successful coalition invasion, assuming of course that they survived the process? I have seen all the documents in the files—the several originals as well as the copies, including documents certified as true by the hon. Gentleman, and all the many post-it notes and annotations in Arabic on them, and the careful indexing—and I and the Committee were struck by the sheer implausibility of the forgery or fake theory.

We then addressed the alternative theory: that the documents were authentic. We went to some trouble to do so. Mr. Oliver Thorne, the head of the questioned documents group at LGC, a leading forensic science firm, and also the man originally instructed by the hon. Gentleman's legal representatives in his libel action against *The Daily Telegraph*, was asked to conduct a forensic analysis of the documents. His conclusions are to be found at document 32 in volume II of our report. They are as unequivocal as any careful scientist is likely to be. Mr. Thorne found that neither the possibility that all the documents are forged, nor the possibility that some forged documents were later seeded among genuine ones, is at all credible. In short, the hon. Gentleman's various accounts of the origin of the *Telegraph* documents are not underpinned either by the evidence or by expert opinion. Indeed, as he admitted when he gave oral evidence to us—an exchange that was more productive than that with the Senate sub-committee—even he could not give us a reason why we should have preferred his version of events. He promised us proof of his case, but never provided it. He mentioned to the commissioner that he had information of nuclear importance. That information turned out to be a damp squib. So the commissioner and the Committee were driven to the conclusion that the documents were authentic and that the story they told was credible. I am not saying that every fact in every document is accurate, but—putting all the evidence carefully assembled by the commissioner together—a coherent, plausible and convincing sequence of events emerges.

Simon Hughes: Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why the Committee felt that it was able to come to its views on, I understand, a balance of probabilities, rather than the stiffer test that has been used in some other deliberations by the Committee?

Sir George Young: The commissioner, in his report, sets out why he chose the balance of probabilities. Unless one is involved in a criminal case, that is the criterion that is normally used, and it is the one that we used. Having said that, if I had to put the case on a spectrum, it would have been more than just the balance of probabilities. The Committee would take the view that it was nearer the top end than the middle end.

Our conclusion was underpinned by two further considerations. First, it was underpinned by other evidence. For example, the allocations by the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organisation on page 75 of volume I show allocations in the name of the Mariam campaign, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and Mr. Zureikat. There was evidence from the United Nations that the oil allocated in those names had been lifted. All that and much other circumstantial evidence pointed to the conclusion that the hon. Member's campaign against sanctions through the Mariam appeal was in effect supported for a substantial period by the former Iraqi regime, through Mr. Fawaz Zureikat and the oil for food programme. As the commissioner concluded, he chose at best to ignore what was going on, but more probably was complicit in it.

The second consideration was the translation of the minute of the hon. Member's meeting with Saddam Hussein on 8 August 2002, to be found on pages 61 to

65 of volume II. That was not one of the *Telegraph* documents. The hon. Member is reported as saying:

"Mr Tariq Aziz has helped us with his contacts and has used his influence to facilitate our job and facilitate the mechanism by which we have been able to obtain the funding necessary to finance our activities. But we are now suffering from the problem of the price of oil which has resulted in a reduction in our income and delay in receiving our dues."

The hon. Member has applied the same conspiracy theory to that document, whose provenance is explained in appendix 3 to volume I of our report, and has denied that that interview was ever recorded. However, as the appendix shows, we received credible evidence that the so-called private meetings with the President were routinely recorded and transcribed. The Committee concluded that this was important independent confirmation of the story that emerged from the *Telegraph* documents.

The hon. Member sought to portray himself as a passive spectator, neither knowing nor even asking where funds for the Mariam appeal came from. The House may well ask whether that was a wise stance for any hon. Member to take in circumstances in which £1.4 million was levered in largely to support campaigning for one of that Member's political objectives. All the evidence, however, points in the opposite direction. The hon. Member was an active player on the field—complicit in the procuring of the funds and in covering up their provenance. In so doing, he deceived the public and he deceived this House.

I turn now to one other aspect of the hon. Member's conduct that concerned the Committee—his habit of blackening the names of those who gave evidence against him. Using parliamentary privilege, the hon. Member in effect accused David Blair of perjury. In his Adjournment debate on 8 May 2006, he said that the claim

"that Mr. Blair was not led to those documents but had merely chanced upon them while wandering around a looted and burning building, and that he had found all of the documents published by the *Telegraph* in the same place, at the same time and in the same box, is quite simply a lie."—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2006; Vol. 446, c. 144.]

If the hon. Member was right, and his assertion had been proved to the relevant standard, David Blair could have gone to prison.

In the same debate, he attributed a claim to another journalist—Philip Sherwell of *The Sunday Telegraph*—which, if true, would have undermined Mr. Blair's story. When approached by the commissioner, however, Mr. Blair insisted that everything the hon. Member had said about him was untrue. Mr. Sherwell said that his comments had been misrepresented during the hon. Member's contribution to the Adjournment debate. The commissioner asked, as did we, the hon. Member for evidence to substantiate the serious allegations he had made about the integrity of Mr. Blair. He never provided it. He relied in making those allegations on second-hand evidence that he claimed to have received from another journalist whose name he has consistently declined to provide in a way that would enable anyone to attempt to corroborate his story.

The hon. Member has asserted on several occasions that we should award him a medal for his part in these events. That action was the action not of a hero, but of a bully. As the Committee pointed out, the hon. Member has given inconsistent evidence on a number of occasions in the course of this inquiry—including on important points such as whether he was ever a signatory of a Mariam appeal bank account. So he himself has failed to observe the standards that he demanded of others.

The hon. Member finally accepted in oral evidence to the Committee last month, that it would have been wiser to have registered the Mariam appeal, and individual donations above the registration threshold. He also accepted, and apologised to us for, his failure consistently to observe his obligations to declare his interest in the Mariam appeal. The Committee also felt that the extent to which resources provided by the House at public expense to assist the hon. Member in discharging his parliamentary duties were used to run the Mariam appeal was excessive.

The hon. Member's partial apology for those more technical offences, although welcome, does not address the seriousness of the overall charges against him. The manner of his dealings with the Iraqi Government was such as to lead him to breach the advocacy rule and the Nolan principles of openness, honesty and accountability. That is why my Committee is recommending more than the apology to the House that the more technical offences alone would warrant. The hon. Member has fundamentally and consistently fallen short in a number of important respects of the specific standards the House expects of its Members. Perhaps most seriously of all, despite the lengthy inquiry, the overwhelming weight of the evidence and the unanimous judgment of colleagues drawn from four political parties, he still remains trapped in a fantasy world of conspiracies and victimisation for his political beliefs.

Today marks the end of an inquiry that began more than four years ago. It has been the subject of the most exhaustive and painstaking inquiry ever undertaken by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who is entirely independent of the political process. His findings that the hon. Member has consistently denied, prevaricated and fudged in relation to the now undeniable evidence that the Mariam appeal—and he indirectly through it—received money derived, via the oil for food programme, from the former Iraqi regime, have been upheld unanimously by a Committee that has interviewed the hon. Member, seen the evidence and cross-examined the expert witness.

The hon. Member is entitled to defend himself vigorously. What has sunk him is not his vigour, his oratory or his views. What has sunk him is the evidence. Neither he nor any other Member is entitled to abuse the privilege of free speech in this Chamber to malign those outside this House, to distort and manipulate the facts to suit his argument in an attempt to mislead the House and the public or to breach the integrity of the House's conduct arrangements while doing so. We have recommended to the House a response, which lies on the Order Paper, that we believe to be fair and proportionate. I invite the House to endorse it.

7.38 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I shall be brief because I do not have much to add to the contribution of the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, on which I have sat since the general election of 2005, in terms of the conduct of the

[Mr. Kevin Barron]

Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway). I wish to put into context his case for the defence. He brought up an event that occurred in 1990, when I spoke out having read an internal report of the National Union of Mineworkers about the misapplication of funds by its then president, Arthur Scargill. As a consequence of my speaking out and the internal report, nearly £750,000 was returned to the NUM, although many millions of pounds remain today in foreign bank accounts. I know not what will become of that.

I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman brought that issue up. He suggested that I was some sort of emissary of Robert Maxwell. I met Robert Maxwell on two occasions, when I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition in the 1980s, and that was probably two occasions more than I would have wished to meet him. I have never been his mouthpiece, nor indeed anybody's mouthpiece, in this place, and it is not worthy to make such a case for the defence. It is a great shame that the hon. Gentleman is not here to hear that.

None of us goes away without being touched by events when we are on Committees. I chair the Select Committee on Health, and Committee members are touched by events, by witnesses' accounts and by the evidence that is given. Some of the case for the defence that we have heard today is not credible—it never has been—and I would urge hon. Members to read the evidence that was put before the Committee before reaching the conclusion that it was credible.

The hon. Gentleman brought in a series of events that had little to do with how we found against him in the report and what we found. The standard of proof was the right one, because the Committee is not a criminal court. This case does raise issues in relation to the criminal court, which those who investigate criminal matters ought perhaps to look at, but that is certainly not something that the Standards and Privileges Committee did, and nor did the commissioner—he does not work to that level. No matter what the standard of proof, however, there was no question but that the hon. Gentleman had got money indirectly from the oil for food programme, and I do not think that anybody can question that, given the evidence before us in the report. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman solicited that money from Mr. Zureikat—not Tony Zureikat, and I would agree with some of the hon. Gentleman's analysis of him as an individual—but Fawaz, his brother, which was a different thing altogether—[HON. MEMBERS: "Cousin."] Sorry, his cousin. Fawaz Zureikat had a note of introduction from the hon. Gentleman so that he could go to Iraq and do the business as far as the Mariam appeal was concerned.

As the Chairman said, the hon. Gentleman said on two occasions that he was wrong not to register, and he clearly should have done that. However, although he said that he felt that he was wrong on two occasions, he has not done so since the report was published last Tuesday and he has not done so again in the House today. The Committee's recommendation, which is before the House today, is that he apologise to the House and be suspended from its service for 18 sitting days. I have not yet heard whether we will get to vote on the 18 days now, but I would genuinely like to think that the hon. Gentleman will come to terms with the House and how it protects people's freedom of speech. It has protected mine in the past and it will protect his if what he says is well intended, although I do not think that that we are there yet as far as he is concerned.

7.42 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): I do not usually speak in debates such as this, although I am a member of the Committee. However, in the light of the attacks mounted by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway), I think that I ought to say a few words.

First, the commissioner had the patience of an absolute saint, given the terrible provocations that he was subject to during the inquiry. I have the utmost respect for the way in which he rose above them and conducted himself with complete dignity and objectivity in producing his report.

I should also like to say something about my Committee colleagues. Our Committee is set up with no party in the majority. It is chaired by an Opposition Member to try to ensure that we have a fair balance. The implication of what the hon. Gentleman says is that he should be tried by a Committee of his friends and, indeed, that any of us should be tried by a Committee of friends. That is not how it should be; the proceedings should be objective.

When I was first appointed to the Committee six years ago—I think that I am the longest-serving member of the Committee along with our Chair—I did not volunteer, but had my arm twisted. I was told that the Committee wanted lawyers because we could be seen to be objective and would follow the evidence because that is what we were trained to do. I am not surprised by the personal attack that we saw today, because it is typical of the hon. Gentleman's bullying style. However, he seems to want to deny me my right to free speech and to speak for Israel in the House, while at the same time claiming his right to speak for Iraq—a right that I am prepared to defend, even if he is not prepared to defend my right to free speech, as our report says.

It is typical of the hon. Gentleman that he uses parliamentary privilege to smear those with whom he disagrees—whether it is a *Telegraph* journalist or those of us in the House—with allegations of bias, such as those against me. However, I would simply say one thing. Over the years that I have been on the Committee, we have had to decide many cases involving Members from both sides of the House, including from my own party. As a whole, members of the Committee tend to be harder on those from their own side than on those from the other side, even when we sometimes find ourselves having to judge those whom we might regard as friends. The fact is that I approached this case no differently from any other on which I have sat, and there have been quite a few. We follow the evidence, we follow the precedent and we go where the evidence takes us, as with the strong evidence in this case and the huge files of documents that we saw and examined in detail, with the benefit of expert advice and opinion—documents that the hon. Gentleman could not be bothered to view himself. We put our party politics and personal views to one side and make our views known, and our decision is made on the basis of the evidence. That is what we did in this case.

7.45 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): These are always difficult debates for this place, Mr. Speaker, and as you evidenced, they are difficult for the Chair. We respect and understand that and therefore always come to such debates carefully.

I want to say two preliminary things about the process. When the present commissioner was appointed, he came here with an extremely good reputation, and nothing that he has done since has suggested that he has not entirely sustained that reputation. Indeed, when you, Mr. Speaker, announced to the House that he was to retire at the end of the year, that was regarded with sadness in a way, but a considerable amount of respect and thanks also went to him, and we have to bear that in mind.

The Chairman of the Committee said that the inquiry was the most difficult he had been asked to do and, on all the evidence, it was the most difficult piece of work the Committee had been asked to do—certainly in recent years. I hope that we will all give the commissioner the thanks he deserves; it was not an easy task and his report is evidently [redacted].

Secondly, I endorse what colleagues have said about the Committee. When we look at the list of members, we do not find members who are not robust and independent-minded colleagues, and they come to the Committee with that reputation. Of course, they come with political views, but experience shows that they do an extremely fair and balanced job on behalf of all of us. Unless there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary—and there is not—we should all be clear that the Committee came to the commissioner's report afresh and formed its own view. On behalf of my colleagues, I thank all those who served on the Committee on this case, which was difficult, and others.

I did not want to intervene more than once while the Chairman of the Committee was speaking, and he kindly answered my question, but I have some factual questions, two of which are for clarification and one other on which he may be able to help me. First, it is implied but nowhere said that before any colleague is called to appear before the Committee, or chooses to do so, they can be legally advised. It is not explicitly stated, but my understanding is that if the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway) wanted to take legal advice at any stage he could do so. I assume that it is implicit, too, that the Committee could take legal advice if it wanted to do so before coming to a view. That is an important point and I hope that the Chairman can clarify it.

Secondly, I have looked back at debates since the war on reports from the Committee or its predecessors. Many recommendations for suspension have been made, from short periods of two days to periods of a month, but an 18-day suspension has never been recommended and I wondered whether there was a reason why the Committee chose that period on this occasion.

Sir George Young: I had not planned to intervene but perhaps I could answer the hon. Gentleman's questions. Of course, Members can take legal advice if they are under investigation and both the Committee and the commissioner have access to legal advice if we need it. The hon. Gentleman asked why we had recommended 18 sitting days. If the recommendation had been a month, when we did not know whether the House might be about to adjourn or go into a recess, we would not have been sure for how long the Member would actually be suspended. By setting an 18-day period, it is absolutely clear how many days the Member will not be in the House.

Simon Hughes: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his clear answers on those two matters.

The third matter, which is only partly for the right hon. Gentleman but which was also raised, is that it is of concern to all Members and you more than anyone, Mr. Speaker, that it appears that the report was leaked before it was brought to the House. You have taken a very clear view about that in all your rulings, and I hope that the investigation that the right hon. Gentleman has initiated will be pursued with all the seriousness that we would expect. Whoever the people concerned and whatever the issue, we must be very clear that it is unacceptable that reports on any matter from Committees of the House go into the public domain in that way. I hope that that investigation will be brought to a speedy but fair and stern conclusion.

I want to make a couple of comments on the report itself. It is very clear from the recommendations and evidence that the judgment on the amount of campaigning done by the hon. Gentleman from the House was well based on the evidence. There is always a question of degree about how much colleagues do things here that trespass into their other political lives, but the evidence in the report is clear that the Mariam appeal was effectively run from here for eight months. The evidence is that it used a considerable amount of resource—people and so on—and that is a warning to all of us. I hope that that has been made clear, and the report reached an entirely reasonable conclusion on that matter.

My understanding is that we also have a system that makes it clear that, if there is any doubt about whether an activity should be declared at the beginning of a debate, when we table questions or in the register, there is now a process for checking that. Constituents sometimes come to us and plead ignorance for not declaring finances in a benefits case. That may be entirely understandable, but here we have a very clear system: where there is any doubt, there is a process for establishing whether we ought to declare. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman said that he was aware at some stages that he needed to make declarations. It is pretty clear that, even if he was denying some of the things, there was a process for clarifying whether he should be on one side of the line or the other, and he clearly failed to do that. None of us has taken a personal view. It is not a view based on the fact that the hon. Gentleman is a member of one party or has left another; it is a view based on the evidence.

On behalf of my colleagues, I thank the right hon. Gentleman and his Committee for their assiduous work in a very difficult case. This will be the end of a long and extended inquiry, made longer by legal proceedings. In the normal tradition of the House, although such matters are never whipped in any corner of the House, I shall certainly support the recommendation of the Committee, because it is absolutely against all our interests if we set up a cross-party, independently minded Committee to

[Simon Hughes]

look into these things and it does a job over weeks and months, on advice, with a senior person helping, and we do not follow its recommendation. It was a unanimous report, and I assume and hope that the House will support it in the same way.

7.53 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I wish to make only a few brief remarks on this matter. It is always with great regret that the House debates motions that relate to the standard of behaviour of a Member, and it does so only after a proper process of investigation, first, obviously, by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and then by the members of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. In this case, those processes have been properly followed and both the commissioner and the Committee have come to their decisions after a considerable period of investigation and consideration.

The members of the Committee are drawn from the House; they are our peers. We appoint them, we ask them to do this job, and we are grateful to them for undertaking this work on our behalf. I entirely refute the suggestions made by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway) that they conduct themselves with anything other than absolute integrity in doing that job on our behalf.

I should also like to pay tribute to Sir Philip Mawer, who has conducted himself in all his inquiries in his position as commissioner with both rigour and integrity. This was a lengthy and complex case, and he should be commended for his hard work and the commitment that he has shown to his task sometimes in the face of considerable provocation, as has been made clear by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young).

My right hon. Friend has properly explained how the Committee came to its decision on the charges made, and it is absolutely clear in the report and it has been made clear this evening that, although some of the charges could have been rectified by an apology, there was certain conduct by the hon. Gentleman that the Committee considered damaged the reputation of the House. I want to make a brief remark on that aspect.

Self-regulation in the House works only as long as all hon. Members are willing to respect the process of scrutiny that has been established by the House. We ask the commissioner to do a job on our behalf. He can do that job only if we all comply with his requirements and are willing to submit ourselves to his inquiries when required to do so.

I note that, in paragraph 352 of the report, the commissioner says:

"I believe that any objective reading of the record of my correspondence and interviews with Mr. Galloway will show that he has consistently failed to live up to the expectation of openness and straightforwardness in responding to questions and in other dealings which is critical to the continued effectiveness of the House's self-regulatory conduct regime."

The reputation of the House depends on our willingness and ability to undertake that self-regulatory regime properly. The Committee has clearly found that, in failing to meet the standards required, the hon. Gentleman brought that process into disrepute and damaged the reputation of the House. I certainly intend to support the motion tonight and encourage all hon. Members to do so.

7.56 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) says, it is always with great reluctance that the House has to debate a motion of this kind. It does so only after a full process of investigation and consideration by a recognised due process. The Committee on Standards and Privileges, following the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, published its sixth report of the 2006-07 Session, entitled "Conduct of Mr. George Galloway", last week.

The Government have arranged this debate at a time when the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway) could be present and as soon as practicable. The debate has considered the consequences of the hon. Gentleman's actions in relation to the standards of conduct that are set out by the House and that the public who elected us expect us all to uphold.

The hon. Gentleman's actions in relation to the matters before us have been investigated by the commissioner and then considered by the Committee on Standards and Privileges. I, too, thank the commissioner, Sir Philip Mawer, for his hard work and commitment to the inquiry. I also thank the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), the Chairman of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and all hon. Members who serve on that Committee for their work on behalf of the House.

The Committee has concluded that the hon. Gentleman has failed to meet the standards expected and that his conduct in certain specific areas has

"in our view damaged the reputation of the House"

to such an extent that a suspension is called for. The right hon. Gentleman has explained the reasons for the Committee's view and for the specific term of the proposed sanction. I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House—

(i) approves the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (House of Commons Paper No. 909); and

(ii) accordingly suspends Mr George Galloway, Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, from the service of the House from Monday 8th October for a period of eighteen sitting days; and in calculating that period paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 12 (House not to sit on certain Fridays) shall not apply.

FORCED MARRIAGE (CIVIL PROTECTION) BILL *[LORDS]* (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 10th July 2007 (Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill [Lords]

(Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Order shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings on consideration and on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—*[Mr. David.]*

Orders of the Day

Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill *[Lords]*

Not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Order for Third Reading read.

7.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Bridget Prentice): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill has now been carefully debated both here and in the other place, and I think that we can safely say that it is a shining example of cross-party co-operation to tackle the dreadful problem of people who are forced to marry. I therefore want to put on record again my thanks both to the Opposition for providing time for the Bill to be debated in the House and to the Liberal Democrats—in particular, Lord Lester—for introducing the Bill in the other place and working so hard to secure its passage there. With the noble Lord's help the Government substantially redrafted the Bill, and when it came here, we adopted it as our own. In this House, we have secured support on both sides for a Bill that will provide much-needed help for the young women—and indeed some men—who find themselves forced to marry. The Bill will go a long way towards tackling that pernicious practice. The cross-party support for the Bill has been critical in ensuring that progress.

On Second Reading and in Committee, there were great debates on some of the most important issues raised by the Bill. It was sensible and proper that those aspects were discussed further. I will comment on one or two of the issues. There was concern that there was not sufficient consultation with stakeholders. The Government, through the forced marriage unit, have been engaged with key stakeholders since the unit was established in 2005 and we also consulted on forced marriage—including whether it should be made a criminal offence—in 2005. A wide-ranging and varied group of stakeholders responded to that consultation.

Lord Lester, who sponsored the Bill in another place, consulted on making changes to his original Bill in February this year. Again, those who responded were wide-ranging and included experts in the field, non-governmental organisations, charities dealing with forced marriage casework, faith groups and other interested individuals. Lord Lester himself has worked with the Southall Black Sisters, which is a well-established, well-known and influential women's group working in London, as well as organisations such as Karma Nirvana in Derby and the Newham Asian Women's Project, both of which have been closely involved with the work of the forced marriage unit and have been consulted regularly.

We also took it upon ourselves to consult a number of the family division judges, who regularly hear such cases, in order to ensure that the drafting of the legislation was appropriate. They made some helpful suggestions to improve the Bill's flexibility and I want to record my thanks to them for their contribution. In the run-up to the Lords Grand Committee, Baroness Ashton met a number of stakeholders, including Southall Black Sisters, Imkaan, Karma Nirvana, and Himat—a support group that meets the particular needs of south Asian gay and bisexual men. She also met Khatun Sapnara, a family law lawyer, who worked closely with Lord Lester in drafting the original Bill.

I wholeheartedly agree with the points that have been made about strong community relations being key to the future success of the legislation once passed and, for that reason, I wanted to set out how important it was that we had met the different groups that have an interest in this area. In that respect, the work of the forced marriage unit, and other NGOs and charities, is critical and invaluable in raising awareness of the issue and highlighting access to support and assistance.

The forced marriage unit, as I said in Committee, undertakes a great deal of publicity, outreach and awareness-raising work. Speeches are made at about 75 events every year. The unit runs a national publicity campaign involving radio, TV and the national and local press. As part of its two-year strategy, it will explore ways of making the outreach programme more targeted and focused on the hard-to-reach community groups and on older generations in communities that are affected by forced marriage. It is also focusing on building links with devolved Governments in the UK and with other Governments across Europe through participation in the EU Daphne-funded project, "Active Against Forced Marriage". The FMU contributes to the Foreign Office's overall work with overseas Governments to improve human rights, including tackling forced marriage and other forms of violence against women.

The Bill is just one part of a much wider programme of work already under way to raise awareness of the problem of forced marriage and to protect women's rights in this area. It might be appropriate at this stage if I remind hon. Members that the Bill has been extended to Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Executive Committee considered the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill on 24 May and agreed that it was content that Westminster should legislate on devolved matters on this occasion. Likewise the Northern Ireland Assembly debated and agreed a legislative consent motion on Monday 4 June.

There was some concern during the debates about whether there should be criminal remedies for forced marriage. The Bill offers civil remedies. As I said on Second Reading, we consulted in 2005 on whether we should introduce criminal offences for forced marriage. The majority response from stakeholders and voluntary groups with great experience in the area was that going down the route of criminalisation might be seen to target and stigmatise certain ethnic and religious communities and would simply drive the practice underground, making the situation even worse for victims. Victims of forced marriage are often unwilling to take action against their parents, and many respondents felt that the legislation would simply not be used. So, we decided against criminalisation.

I want to make it clear, however, that clause 63R of the Bill signposts the existing protection that is available under criminal law as well as under other civil legislation. That includes the inherent jurisdiction of the High Court, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Family Law Act 1996, a civil claim for damages, and an application under the Children Act 1989. The clause also makes it clear that the Bill will

[Bridget Prentice]

not prevent a person from seeking a remedy provided in other areas of law. So, when a crime is committed as part of a strategy designed to force someone to marry, it should be reported to the police and can be prosecuted in the normal way.

The primary purpose of the Bill, however, is preventive. It is aimed at protecting the victim from being forced into marriage. Nevertheless, there are some cases in which the victim may wish to seek additional remedies, such as making a civil claim for damages—in cases where she could do so anyway. The clause makes it clear that nothing in the Bill prevents such an application.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): The Minister is absolutely right to say that the whole purpose of the Bill is preventive. Is she satisfied that there are enough other policies in place to alert young people, as they come through our schools and as they come to adulthood in this country—whether they were born here or came here—about their rights and the protection that the law will give them? Often, by the time they learn about the law, it may be too late. If they can learn in a multicultural environment, they may have some support systems in place before it comes to the point of a forced marriage.

Bridget Prentice: The hon. Gentleman makes an important and valid point. I will come on to that and describe in some detail some of the things that the Government will do once the Bill becomes law. He is quite right that this is something that we need to raise awareness of, not just among community groups, but within schools, so that the support of the school will be one of the protections that young people can have if they feel that they, or their brothers or sisters, are being forced into a marriage. The Bill will allow a teacher, as a third party, to respond appropriately.

The other aspect of the Bill is deterrence. Each year, the forced marriage unit receives about 5,000 calls for general advice and it ends up handling some 300 cases. Last year, the Metropolitan police recorded 518 incidents related to forced marriage. That gives us the beginning of an indication of the scale of the problem. I believe—I suspect that other hon. Members will agree with me—that, like other forms of domestic violence, forced marriage is seriously under-reported. There are likely to be many more victims who have been suffering in silence. We hope that, as well as offering protection to those who are in danger of being forced into marriage, the Bill will act as a deterrent, sending out a clear message that forced marriage will simply not be tolerated in our democracy.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) raised the issue of whether we should require all British nationals who wish to marry abroad, or who may marry abroad, to register the marriage in this country before it takes place. I have considered that and I understand the point that he is making. He may wish to expand on it in this Third Reading debate. However, I repeat that such a provision may well send out the wrong message: that forced marriages only take place abroad and that the only authorities that can be trusted to recognise whether there is free and full consent are those in England and Wales. Clearly, that is not the case.

As I said in Committee, as part of its review of immigration policy, the Home Office is working on issuing a public consultation paper about new arrangements for marriage visas entitled "Marriage to partners from overseas". One aspect of the consultation will focus on what steps can be taken as regards the requirements for sponsoring a marriage visa; for example, the minimum age could be raised to help those who are pressurised into sponsoring such a visa. That might be a more fruitful way to tackle the problem than requiring everyone who marries abroad to register their marriage in this country. I understand that the Border and Immigration Agency hopes to publish that consultation before the end of July, and to receive responses in the autumn. The forced marriage unit already works with UKvisas and the Border and Immigration Agency to stop visas being granted on the basis of a forced marriage. There were over 100 such cases involving Pakistan alone in 2006-07.

My other concern about the proposal is that it might be disproportionate. It would affect all marriages entered into abroad, the vast majority of which are clearly legitimate and voluntary. In addition, it could catch two British citizens who are resident in the UK and who choose to marry overseas, as is quite popular nowadays. The proposal would have a significant effect on legitimate marriages, and it might make them invalid in the United Kingdom if a notice of intention to marry had not been registered. That would result in what is called limping marriages—marriages that are recognised in one country but not another. That could leave couples uncertain as to their legal rights. In the end, the measure might have a detrimental effect on legitimate marriage, rather than prevent forced marriages. For that reason, on the whole I do not think that the measure would be appropriate, although I understand what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield was trying to achieve.

The forced marriage unit has had regard to the Bill in its presentations and has discussed its provisions on an ad hoc basis with a variety of audiences in the past six months. When the Bill reaches the statute book, the unit will of course formalise that arrangement, and it will become one of the Government's foremost means of discussing the Bill with stakeholders across the country. The unit will also re-prioritise its outreach programme. As part of that, it will look to target the specific audiences on whom the Bill will have the greatest impact.

The unit has great access to a wide network of black and minority ethnic media outlets, and it will explore the possibility of generating further media coverage in those specialist outlets when the Bill becomes law. In the past two years, the unit has produced guidelines on tackling forced marriage for the police, social services, and health and education professionals, and it is producing similar guidelines for registrars and legal professionals. The unit recently launched a survivors' handbook, which offers information and practical support to survivors of forced marriage. Once the Bill is law, the unit will issue revised editions of its guidelines for all those organisations, in accordance with the statutory power that requires those people who exercise public functions to have due regard to relevant guidance. The new version will include advice on how professionals can use the Bill's new provisions.

In Committee, the issue of the Bill's application to people other than named respondents was raised. New

section 63B(2)(c) of the Family Law Act 1996, which is inserted by the Bill, provides that a forced marriage protection order can be directed at unnamed persons who are, or may become, involved "in other respects", such as members of the family. However, an order can be so directed only if the court believes it appropriate to make such an order for the purposes of protecting the individual concerned. That provision is necessary to reflect the real nature of forced marriage, which can come about following the involvement of a large group of people, possibly a whole family or even a community group. In many cases it simply is not feasible for the applicant to name all the potential respondents, especially if there is an urgency to the application, and it has been brought by a third party. The provision allows the court to make orders against people who appear to be involved in coercion, even if they cannot be readily identified.

It was suggested in Committee that those categories of people should be captured by the order only if they knowingly acted in a way that might force a person into marriage, but that would be extremely difficult for any applicant to prove, and it might in effect make the provision unworkable. For the most part, being involved "in other respects" will generally require some kind of knowledge of what the lead respondent is doing; for example, counselling, encouraging or conspiring all presuppose some sort of knowledge. However, orders to protect the victim could still in theory be addressed to people who are not morally culpable in any way. An order could be addressed to any person prohibiting them from aiding, abetting or encouraging the victim to marry. To use the example mentioned in Committee, that would include the priest, if the court thought that the circumstances justified it.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between making an order and enforcing it. The Bill does not change the current law of contempt. Before a person can be committed for contempt, the court must be satisfied that that person had sufficient knowledge of the order to know that his actions would frustrate its intention. To continue with the example of the priest, the order could not be enforced against him unless he had knowledge of the order, and intended to interfere with the administration of justice by frustrating it.

I shall say a few words about the implementation of the Bill, because that issue is clearly of interest to the House. The first task will be to develop the necessary court rules, which will put in place the procedure for dealing with the kind of cases that we are talking about. We will take forward the drafting of the rules and the necessary court forms in conjunction with the family procedure rule committee. An early task for us is to discuss with the president of the family division the possibility of his issuing a practice direction to promote the effective handling of such cases in courts that have jurisdiction over such cases. A key element of such a practice direction is to set out what special measures are available to assist vulnerable witnesses in giving evidence.

Committee members rightly identified the need for proper training and guidance, both on forced marriage and on the legislation, as key to ensuring that the Bill is implemented successfully, and to ensuring that we really tackle the problem of forced marriage. As my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General said on Second Reading, we have the great advantage of having experienced judges in the family division, who are already used to handling such cases under the inherent jurisdiction of the High Court. They will be key to ensuring the success and early implementation of the Act in the High Court and in those county courts where we expect such cases to arise. In addition, the experienced staff in the forced marriage unit will be a key resource in promoting knowledge of the Act among the public service professionals on whom we—and, more importantly, the victims of forced marriage—will rely to make the legislation a success.

The expertise of the forced marriage unit will be essential when it comes to designing the initial process to identify and consult on which bodies might be designated relevant third parties under the legislation. I gave the example of a teacher, but that would be a one-off; there are obviously more established third parties, the forced marriage unit being one of them, which could be designated relevant third parties under the legislation. Such bodies will be enabled to bring actions on behalf of victims of forced marriage without first obtaining the leave of the court.

We have had a thorough debate on the Bill, not just on the Floor of the House and in the other place, but also in Committee. The thoughtful contributions made by all concerned have ensured that the Bill is worthy of the House's support, and I commend it to the House.

8.19 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to follow the Minister. This is the first Bill in which I have ever been involved where the Report stage has passed without amendments being tabled. Although one worries that we may have missed something if there is too great a degree of consensus across the House, I should like to think that that properly reflects the care that has gone into making the Bill effective, and also the fact that it has commanded so much support across the House.

We believe that the Bill will be a powerful tool in helping to prevent forced marriages or, if they have taken place, in trying to ensure that their appalling effects may be mitigated or removed. We greatly welcome the fact that the noble Lord Lester of Herne Hill introduced the Bill, and the fact that the Government were willing to take it over and to provide their expertise in its redrafting, which was substantial, while respecting the intention that had led Lord Lester to propose the measure in the first place. As a result of incorporating the provisions in the Bill into the Family Law Act 1996, the Government have produced a sensible measure that will give the courts maximum flexibility in dealing with the problem.

I do not intend to go over the ground that the Minister covered so well. That is not the purpose of debate in the Chamber. For the Opposition, it has been a privilege to participate in the process and to make time available to ensure that the Bill could get through, whereas private Members' Bills coming from the other place usually encounter difficulty. As the Minister commented, a number of aspects that were raised in Committee merit passing reference before we send the Bill on its way.

The first, with which the Minister dealt at some length a few minutes ago, was whether there ought to

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

have been a criminal offence of causing a forced marriage or participating in causing a forced marriage to take place. I know that a number of Opposition Members have been exercised about that. Because forced marriage is such an unpleasant concept, there are many who feel that only by making it clear to those who participate in such enterprises that there is a criminal sanction will we mark our disapproval. That merits consideration, but a powerful case was made, particularly by those whom the Government consulted on the measure, that one of the consequences would be to discourage individuals from coming forward because of the fear that by doing so, they would bring about criminal sanctions against close relatives.

Trying to apply my lawyer's mind to the matter, I am left with the sensation that to construct such a criminal offence would require us to look far more narrowly than the very wide definition that we have been able to give in civil proceedings. That would oblige us to highlight the fact that the offence was difficult to define. We know, for example, that it is made up of constituent ingredients, most of which are already criminal offences in themselves. Trying to encapsulate that in a single offence might be very difficult. For that reason I have consistently shied away from attempting to do so.

If the legislation does not prove to be as effective as we hope, we may have to return to the issue. I am conscious that the record for prosecutions linked to forced marriages does not suggest that these are easy offences to prove, even though the individual offences that might currently be committed are pretty clear. I endorse the Government's approach and I hope that the flexibility gained by using the Family Law Act will produce a more effective measure than would result from introducing criminal sanctions.

On the second matter, the registration of marriages contracted outside the UK, I am grateful to the Minister for writing to me about that and for dealing with it in this evening's debate. She made a good point when she said that we do not wish to leave people in limbo. I accept that the amendment that I proposed in Committee was never capable of being incorporated in the Bill because of the rather narrow way in which the Bill is drafted in amending the 1996 Act, and it was not my intention to leave people in limbo. There might have to be another approach, allowing registration after marriage, as well as before.

I disagree slightly with the Minister in that I do not see the proposal as being essentially too onerous or discriminatory against the world in general. I fully accept that many countries have effective mechanisms for ensuring that forced marriages do not take place, but quite a few countries probably do not. The merit of the proposal in principle is that by requiring the intention of a resident British national to marry to be registered before the marriage takes place, it allows the registrar, for example, to make an assessment as to whether the person coming to register the marriage, who would have to be the person intending to marry, has the intellectual capacity to be capable of contracting marriage, and appears not to be coerced and to be happy at the prospect of coming along to carry out that registration.

I hope that that idea—I say no more than that—will be borne in mind by the Government when they come to consider the other measures that the Minister helpfully outlined to the House in respect of the granting of visas and entry to the United Kingdom. A procedure that allows a British registrar of marriages or some other person to make a gentle assessment as to whether what is taking place is voluntary or not is an essential prerequisite to stopping such marriages taking place or, if they have taken place, to provide a mechanism by which a reference might be made to the court.

Secrecy is clearly the handmaiden of such marriages. I know from personal experience, as I explained to the Minister in Committee, that there are women who are sent abroad to marry in circumstances where it is clear that their participation is not voluntary or that they are not capable of deciding whether they wish to marry. Once the marriage has taken place, it becomes much more difficult to help the person concerned and put right the evil consequences that flow from it. If it could therefore be picked up prior to the marriage taking place, that would be valuable.

Simon Hughes: Would the hon. Gentleman apply that principle in general to marriages contracted in this country? He knows that people like Paul Kenyon, who works for the BBC, have done very good work exposing the bogus marriage business. I have always had an inkling of a view that before registrars sign people up for next Saturday week, they ought to see the two parties separately to discover whether there is a valid marriage in prospect, rather than a contrived one.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Until quite recently, the rules in this country were extremely lax, although we have gone some way towards tightening them up. I am sure also—the point was well made by the Minister—that there are forced marriages taking place in this country under the very eyes of registrars or clergy of whichever denomination it may be. We have to put our own house in order. I think that we are capable of doing that, and the proposals mentioned by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) are highly pertinent in that regard.

Although forced marriages clearly take place here, they also take place abroad, and when they take place abroad, it provides a mechanism by which people think that they can subvert scrutiny, which is something that we need to think about. However, I fully accept that the Bill is not the place to address that issue—indeed, as drafted, I could not include such a measure in the Bill, no matter what ingenuity I deployed. I hope that the Minister will forgive me for raising the matter yet again, because when we come on to other matters at some later date, I hope that the general point will be addressed, even if that does not involve my particular drafting—I accept that my provision was not well researched, because I could see the flaws in the arguments even when I was drafting it. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the Government should bear in mind the intention behind that provision.

I do not want to take up any more of the House's time. The Bill is a good Bill, and I commend it and share its commendation to the House. I simply express again the great hope that it will go some way to alleviating this serious evil.

8.30 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): I am delighted at last to find myself in the House discussing the implementation of legislation to counter forced marriages. How times have changed since February 1999, when I, with the support of the then Member for Halifax, Alice Mahon, first raised the issue in an Adjournment debate.

At that time, the self-appointed leaders of communities met my comments with hostility and denial. Eight years on, it is extremely gratifying to see cross-party support to challenge what is a brutal crime against humanity based on a mediaeval, patriarchal culture that should have no place in our society. However, my delight must be tempered by a note of caution. This Bill, which has been much welcomed, cannot be the end of the matter, and there is a great deal more to do. Over the past three years, I have argued the case for a new specific criminal offence of forcing or conspiring to force someone into marriage. The main thrust of the argument in opposition to my view is that adequate criminal legislation is already in place.

My daughter happens to work for the Crown Prosecution Service, and she kindly obtained a coffee mat—I must point out that it is not a beer mat—produced by the CPS that is headed "Forced marriage". It states:

"If you are forcing someone into marriage, some of the offences you could be prosecuted for are: Kidnap, Threats to kill, Rape, False imprisonment, Blackmail, Child Abduction, Harassment".

That is quite a list. However, despite the fact that the forced marriage unit, West Yorkshire police, my office and others have all seen an increasing number of cases, there has not been, as far as I am aware, a single prosecution by the CPS under current criminal legislation against such criminal activity being used to enforce marriage. It is therefore imperative that this Bill does not suffer the same fate by going unused and that it is not seen as a soft option. Its success in addressing the matter will depend on political will and ensuring that it is widely known, understood and used.

We now have guidelines for the police, social workers, schools and health professionals to stop forced marriages. As useful and necessary as those guidelines are, I remain to be convinced that they have managed to filter through to the front line. Indeed, recently officers from one constabulary told me that the guidelines were filed somewhere in the chief constable's office. Unless the guidelines are publicised among the professionals who encounter forced marriages and training is offered, then the well-being or even the life of a young girl could be in jeopardy.

I am pleased that the Minister has suggested that all such guidelines will be updated to include information regarding the possible actions that this Bill will enable. The Bill must not simply be filed in a desk somewhere. It must be supported by a programme of publicity and education that reaches every school, mosque and community centre in the country. The same drip feed of information that is proving so successful in tackling the wider issue of domestic violence needs to be adopted for forced marriages.

I have some sympathy with the comments made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) in Committee and tonight regarding the introduction of a pre-marriage register. That would not only add another tier of protection from a forced marriage, but, as we discussed in Committee, give greater protection to disabled people, who might not be wholly aware of the marriage.

Although I am delighted that we are debating the Bill, there is more that can and should be done. Young girls are still disappearing from schools at the age of 14 or 15, their education interrupted or ended, returned to the country of their parents, married, and returned here only when they are able to support an application for the husband to come to the UK. We cannot allow young women to be used as a vehicle to get round immigration rules in order to assist economic migration. We cannot allow the lives of young people to be disrupted, and in some cases destroyed, for the sake of satisfying mediaeval cultural practices. To be denied the right to an education in such circumstances is discriminatory and unacceptable.

An increase in the age limit from the current 18 for migration to the UK must be introduced for applicants and sponsors. I have asked for it to be increased to 21. On Second Reading, my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty) argued for 23 or 24, in line with the Danish regulations. Whatever the age, it must be sufficient to allow young people to go to school, and plan to go to university if they so choose, without the fear of being used, instead, as a tool to strengthen a biraderi or as a vehicle for economic migration to improve the economic well-being of families thousands of miles away. It is better by far that that should be achieved from general taxation through the Department for International Development. Denmark's Integration Minister recently argued that the Danish immigration policy

"works exactly as it is intended. We've gotten a handle on immigration and broken the pattern where generations of young people primarily found their spouses abroad."

Zubair Butt Hussain, spokesman for the Danish organisation Muslims in Dialogue, argued:

"There is a completely different tendency now amongst younger groups of immigrants and their children to instead look for a partner here in Denmark or Europe."

The time has come to abolish the whole concept of indefinite leave to remain after being in the UK for two years. Migrants should, upon arrival, aspire to and work towards citizenship. Only British citizens should be allowed to act as a sponsor for the purposes of immigration through marriage. That would not only address the incidence of forced marriage but increase the move towards greater integration and cohesion.

Decisions and legislation designed to curb the excesses of a culture that are based on a lack of understanding of that culture are unlikely to succeed. Had the Americans bothered to attempt to understand the Vietnamese, they would have realised that theirs was a war they could never have won and should never have fought—similarly with Iraq. Likewise, to challenge criminal, inhumane practices from a position of weakness—that is, a lack of understanding as to why it occurs in the first place—will, history suggests, lead to failure.

The Danes and the Dutch are getting there. The Bill, based as it is on our principles of tolerance and accommodation, may satisfy our understanding of the problem, but does it reflect any understanding of the

[Mrs. Ann Cryer]

perpetrators of the crime and their behaviour? I therefore have to say to the families concerned that if this measure, together with changes in immigration regulations, does not stop the enforcement of marriage, I, for one, will seek the introduction of a specific criminal offence, because we simply cannot go on like this—our British-born young Asian women deserve better.

8.38 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I welcome this Third Reading debate, which follows a productive and consensual Second Reading and Committee stage. The Minister adeptly outlined many of the issues surrounding the Bill, so I will keep my remarks fairly brief, but there are a few points that I would like to put on the record on behalf of my party.

My first point follows on from the comments of the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) about the offence being a civil, rather than a criminal, one. She made a good case for looking again at that issue, if the legislation does not provide the tools and armoury we hope for to tackle this insidious activity. The arguments in favour of a civil offence are very strong, and we want to ensure that we encourage potential victims of forced marriage to come forward without fear or concern that their loved ones will be criminalised as a result. Although sending out a strong message by making something a crime is superficially attractive, I suspect that we want the approach that works, and one that is more pragmatic is more likely to achieve results. That is not to say, however, that we should not monitor that approach carefully and ensure that it does achieve results.

I welcome the Minister's correspondence with Committee members. I welcome the fact that she has taken up two particular points that I raised in Committee. The first concerned ensuring that vulnerable victims of forced marriage, such as children or those with learning disabilities, are adequately considered in the proceedings, and that provision is made to ensure that their voices are heard, with whatever special measures are appropriate. In Committee, and in the House today, the Minister said that she would take that up with the president of the family division with regard to the issuing of practice direction, which is welcome. I hope that it ensures that everyone can benefit from the legislation, particularly the most vulnerable.

Secondly, we had a short debate about guidance in Committee. The Minister said in her letter:

> "With the passage of the Forced Marriage Bill into law, the FMU's Guidelines for Professionals (including Guidance For The Police, Social Workers, Teachers And Health Professionals) will be put onto a statutory footing. This will require the FMU to issue revised editions of these Guidelines and the new versions will include advice on how professionals can best make use of the new provisions contained within the Forced Marriage Bill."

That is welcome, but the problem outlined by the hon. Member for Keighley remains—guidance can sometimes end up in a filing cabinet somewhere. As well as formal legal guidance, which must be issued, I reiterate what I said in Committee: it is vital that clear, easy-to-understand information is made easily available, such as a simple leaflet that can be distributed more widely than what is issued to professionals.

The Minister mentioned the budget. She said in Committee that how well something is publicised depends on funds being available. We live in the real world; there are always constraints. I argue that the costs associated with this are not necessarily huge. What is important is not that huge amounts of money are spent—although the more, the better, to ensure that information reaches the maximum number of people—but that the Bill is distilled into plain English so that people can understand it. I suspect it will need not only to be in plain English but to be made plain in other languages, too. The hon. Member for Keighley made a point about the legislation not remaining unused, and clear guidance will be essential to ensure that it is used.

The outreach programme from the forced marriage unit, which the Minister outlined, is important and greatly welcome, and I also welcome her point that devolved Governments will be involved in the process. People are victims of this situation throughout the United Kingdom, and we must ensure that the expertise of the FMU is put to good use.

In conclusion, the FMU deals with 300 cases a year of people in the most desperate situations, who are often subject to an horrific catalogue of crimes, from violence to kidnap and rape. Those 300 cases could be just the tip of the iceberg. Of course, prevention is much better than cure, and if the legislation ensures a route out before such marriages take place, victims will be provided with another option. I very much hope that that will be the case.

All the organisations that were consulted about and involved in shaping the Bill and all the people who campaigned on the issue for many years, including the hon. Member for Keighley, deserve the thanks of the House. I also thank my noble Friend Lord Lester of Herne Hill for introducing the measure in another place, the Government for adopting it to ensure that it had a fighting chance of making it to the statute book—that is much appreciated—and, of course, the Conservatives for making sure that parliamentary time was made available. Getting the Bill on to the statute book has therefore taken an effort of the whole House, and I am delighted to add Liberal Democrat support to its Third Reading.

8.45 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I am glad of the opportunity to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) to say a few words from a constituency perspective and from my experience. I have been unable to participate in the debates so far in the short time that the Bill has been before the House, but I am glad that it is here.

I join hon. Members' tributes not only to the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) but to Alice Mahon, whom she mentioned. Such people ensure that we do not run away from the difficult issue that we are considering. My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire rightly paid tribute to my noble Friend Lord Lester. As a human rights lawyer, he understood the importance of the issue in many communities. I want to share my experience to show how important it is not only to accept the Bill, but to perceive it as unfinished work.

Last year I attended a wedding of some friends, a young couple who are Indian Hindus. Their marriage was contracted willingly, but in the context of an arranged family get-together. That is common; it is fine, and it works. I attended a similar marriage between cousins of theirs some years ago. That marriage has been successful. The family live near me and I see them almost every day; they have lovely children and everything is going well.

However, one night some years ago I was asked to respond to a Green Card from Central Lobby. A young man had been referred to me because his family were trying to drive him into a marriage and he could not stand it any longer. He ran away from home. I was not his Member of Parliament, but he had been given my name as somebody who might be helpful, and I worked with his Member of Parliament, who was in a different party, to support the young man.

In the past couple of weeks I learned—sadly, too late—of some acquaintances, a boy and a girl, who have both been forced to be married. In their case, the violence was not physical but psychological, and there were huge other pressures. The girl is only 20 and wants to study. She does not want to get married at the moment. The boy wants to go on being single for the foreseeable future. However, they have given in. In their case, the arrangement was made on a trip to Pakistan, where the engagement happened. The marriage took place here.

Many young people—boys as well as girls, men as well as women—are in the position that I described. The Bill covers people who are forced into marriage without their "free and full consent"—the words are clear and simple. It clearly provides that it does not matter where the conduct is directed, and that it includes coercion by threats or other psychological means. We must send a clear and strong signal about what that means.

Sometimes young women do not simply not want to get married to a specific person, they do not want to get married at all at that stage in their lives. They may want to remain single; indeed, they may never want to get married, for various reasons. That is a choice. The same applies to young men. When cultural pressures are huge, people are often assumed to be ready to settle down, get married and have children young when they do not want to do that. That applies to people who are heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, those who do not know their sexuality and those have not determined the lifestyle that they want to adopt. They are often driven to comply with the norms and expectations of their families, and the pressures are enormous.

The 300 cases of forced marriage are the tip of the iceberg. I am absolutely clear that we are not talking about thousands of people in this country, but about tens of thousands of people who are married, but who would chose not to be married if they had their free will. I am not saying that in the end people do not make a go of it, or that sometimes people do not accept that, but that is not the society that we should encourage or support. We should allow people to make their own choices. Of course we try to encourage people to settle down into relationships. None the less, we should require that people get married only when they are clear what they are doing, and when they enter into marriage freely and willingly.

I want to make my two final points, one of which I made in my intervention on the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve). Instinctively, I am against the creation of lots of legislation, and particularly lots of new offences, as the Minister knows. Therefore it is right to start with a civil procedure rather than further criminal law, because there are already relevant laws on the statute book. However, I am also clear that we need to address the linked questions of how we register marriages both here and abroad, and how we recognise marriages here that are made abroad, some of which are made by custom and practice and are barely marriages at all. Sometimes people have come to my surgery and said, "I'm married." "How were you married?" I have asked. The answer is that they were married when one person was in this country and the other in another. The marriage was contracted without those involved being in the same place. Let us face up to these things.

It is not so easy to do this now, but there has been a sad tradition, for all the reasons that we know, of people forcing others to get married or using their marriages to get all the other advantages—normally citizenship, residency or leave to remain. We should examine that. I invite the Minister to give us an opportunity to examine—perhaps with her colleagues, who I know are very sympathetic—the broader issue that the hon. Member for Keighley has often raised, of ensuring that the systems are not abused, and of how we can, as it were, turn people away from the doors of the registry office, the registrar, the temple, the gurdwara, the mosque or the church, when one or both of them do not want to be there, or the marriage is a contrivance.

My final point is about education. The Minister represents a similar sort of constituency to mine, while the hon. Member for Beaconsfield has significant links with many of our minority communities and my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire has done work on behalf of women in our party and beyond. We all know the reality: education starts at an early age. One needs to establish, at the beginning of secondary school, the basis of how this country works, and expects people to get married. That should be done not just through formal education but through informal education, including youth clubs and other organisations. There are some really good charities that help people—the Minister referred to some voluntary organisations with good practice—as well as women's organisations, youth organisations and so on. I hope that we will continue to encourage those organisations, to ensure that we get the message out early—in all the appropriate languages, as my hon. Friend said—and that we give support.

That is particularly important in single-faith schools, where the cultural pressures are greater. In mixed-community schools, where people come from all faiths and none, the chances of having a friend who does not come from the same cultural background in whom one can confide are much greater. A young person who goes to an all-Muslim, all-Sikh or all-Hindu school is in much greater difficulty. I have had to counsel people who have had nobody in whom they could confide, because they just did not trust those around them—the uncle, aunt or equivalent of the godparent—because they were not sure whether, in the end, they would

[Simon Hughes]

come down on their side or the side of the parents and the cousins. Sadly, on one occasion I have seen the family come and kidnap somebody, in order to take them home to do their will as a family.

That is the sort of society that we still have, so the Bill, which is the result of a worthwhile private Member's initiative, is timely. However, legislating is the beginning of the process, not the end. Education needs to follow, and to reach the parts that other education has not reached. Beyond that, I hope that we can have a further debate about how to stop people from being driven into marriages that they do not want to enter into, because that way lies huge unhappiness, often domestic violence, mental illness and psychological upset, and extremely unhappy lives. If we can spare tens of thousands of people that, we will be doing a lot of people a good service.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed, without amendment..

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): With the permission of the House, I shall put together motions 4 to 13.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees).

Criminal Law

That the draft Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 (Amendment) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 21st May, be approved.

Investigatory Powers

That the draft Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Acquisition and Disclosure of Communications Data: Code of Practice) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 11th June, be approved.

That the draft Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Investigation of Protected Electronic Information: Code of Practice) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 11th June, be approved.

Passports

That the draft Verification of Information Passport Applications Etc. (Specified Persons) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 29th June, be approved.

Access to Justice

That the Revised Funding Code prepared by the Legal Services Commission, a copy of which was laid before this House on 14th June, be approved.

Industrial Development

That the draft Financial Assistance For Industry (Increase of Limit) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 19th June, be approved.

Constitutional Law

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 20th June, be approved.

That the draft Scottish Parliament (Elections etc.) (Amendment) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 2nd July, be approved.

International Development

That the draft International Fund for Agricultural Development (Seventh Replenishment) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 21st June, be approved.

Disabled Persons

That the draft Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Amendment etc.) (General Qualifications Bodies) (Alteration of Premises and Enforcement) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 26th June, be approved.—*[Mr. David.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9)(European Standing Committees).

Global Approach to Migration

That this House takes note of European Union Documents No. 9773/07, Commission Communication on the application of the EU Global Approach to Migration to the Eastern and South-Eastern Regions Neighbouring the European Union and No. 9776/07, Commission Communication on circular migration and mobility partnerships between the European Union and third countries; and supports the Government's position that the expansion of the Global Approach to Migration provides an opportunity to assess progress so far as well as explore and clarify the concepts of circular migration and mobility partnerships.—*[Mr. David.]*

Question agreed to.

Sittings in Westminster Hall

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, on Thursday 26th July, there shall be no sitting in Westminster Hall.—*[Mr. David.]*

8.55 pm

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am very concerned about this motion. It is not the first of its kind to appear at the end of a parliamentary term, and I object to it on the ground that I can see absolutely no reason why the Thursday sitting in Westminster Hall should be suspended on the last day on which Parliament sits. The public are rightly concerned that MPs go away for an 11 or 12-week recess, which, perhaps unfairly, they regard as a long summer break for Members of Parliament. In that regard, it seems extraordinary for the Government effectively to propose that the very last opportunity for a Westminster Hall sitting should not be taken.

I am disturbed, not only because that will be the last opportunity for such a debate before the summer recess, but because Westminster Hall now offers an extremely good opportunity for Back Benchers to raise and debate issues of concern. The quality of debate in the Thursday sittings has been quite extraordinary. In the past few weeks, for example, we had a very good debate on anti-Semitism, which is an issue of huge concern to many of us. There has also been a very good debate on the changes to legal aid services—an issue that affects most Members and their constituents.

The Government's motion sends the wrong signal to the great British public: namely, that Parliament is not to be given an opportunity to discuss issues of concern on that day, especially under the present prime ministership. We were promised just a few weeks ago that the Prime Minister wanted to put Parliament back at the centre of British public life. We are not talking about a huge amount of parliamentary time; we are talking about a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall. It is extraordinary that the Government should seek to squash three hours of parliamentary debate.

I could suggest a list of subjects that would be worthy of three hours of parliamentary time, not least those dealing with the way in which my Kettering constituents are affected by Government policy. We could also discuss some of the Select Committee reports that have come up for debate in Westminster Hall. We have been promised that the work of the Select Committees is to be more greatly valued by the present Administration than it was by the previous one. What better opportunity could there be than to devote the last three hours of parliamentary debate in Westminster Hall to discussing a recent Select Committee report?

If the Government are short of ideas on that front, perhaps I could suggest the recent excellent report from the Transport Committee, on which I sit, on novice drivers. It proposed the raising to 18 of the age at which young people may take their driving test, on the basis that we now face the horrendous prospect of 1,000 young drivers a year losing their lives on British roads. A debate would provide a wonderful opportunity for a Transport Minister to come along to Westminster Hall and listen to Members' views and provide an early response to the report on behalf of the Government.

My concern is that, time and again, at the end of every parliamentary Session, the Government try prematurely to end debating opportunities in Westminster Hall. I would very much like to hear from the Deputy Leader of the House why this motion is being moved and, if it were to be passed this evening, what plans she has to reinstate an extra three hours of parliamentary debate.

9.1 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Helen Goodman): I do not intend to delay the House long, as the motion is quite straightforward. I was pleased to hear how much the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone) values Westminster Hall debates, which were introduced, of course, by this Government as an innovation designed to give Back Benchers further opportunities to initiate debate. I remind the hon. Gentleman, however, that it is not the case that Ministers cannot be called to account between the beginning of the recess and our return in October, because the Government have introduced written questions in September. I am sure that he will be aware of that option.

The motion asks us to agree that this Thursday's sitting in Westminster Hall should not take place. The hon. Member for Kettering may not be aware of the consultation on the motion with the political parties, with Mr. Speaker and with the Chairman of Ways and Means, during which no objection was raised by any of the parties. I encourage the hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members with further issues to raise to participate in the pre-recess Adjournment debate on Thursday. There will be plenty of time—indeed, more time than would have been available in Westminster Hall—to raise issues that are important to hon. Members and their constituents. I commend the motion to the House.

9.2 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone) for ensuring that we do not allow this motion through on the nod. I accept what the Deputy Leader of the House says about consultation, although it would have applied to my predecessor rather than to me in my new job, shadowing the hon. Lady's office. I would like to pick up a couple of issues that follow on from the debate.

I welcome Westminster Hall debates, which were a good initiative. I was personally saddened that, because of the two parliamentary by-elections last Thursday, I could not attend the debate on the important subject of anti-Semitism. Those are exactly the sort of debates that we should be having in Westminster Hall.

Will the Deputy Leader of the House reflect on the fact—either now, with your permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or later—that we appear to have lost one of the Government's good initiatives: cross-cutting debates in Westminster Hall? There was a period when we had them, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. This is not a wide-ranging debate on the purposes of Westminster Hall. It is simply about the motion on the Order Paper.

Simon Hughes: I will rein back, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and talk about the opportunities presented by this Thursday's sitting for a cross-cutting debate, which appear to have disappeared.

The general argument that the House should lose its Westminster Hall debate on the last day of the Session on the grounds that there is a perfectly reasonable debate on the Floor of the House is not an overwhelming one. I can see the logic of the argument, but the alternative of providing an opportunity to debate Select Committee or other reports in Westminster Hall is equally logical. For example, the Defence Committee recently produced a very important report on overstretch among our forces, particularly in Afghanistan. That is a vital issue, so our failure to debate it before we go into the long summer recess seems to be a dereliction of our general duty.

Mr. Hollobone: I am following the hon. Gentleman's remarks with a great deal of interest. Does he agree that although the Deputy Leader of the House says that the issues can be covered in the Adjournment debate on the main Floor of the House, we are losing three hours of parliamentary airtime, which will be denied to Back Benchers and others for ever unless she makes proposals to reinstate them?

Simon Hughes: I have been here long enough to know that at this stage in the proceedings the machine is rolling sufficiently strongly that to change it would be surprising if not impossible. The Deputy Leader of the House tells me that consultations have taken place, and it would be embarrassing to my colleague, whoever agreed to the proposal, if I suddenly put a spoke in the works. One of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues must have agreed to the proposal, too. Clearly, at some stage, someone addressed the question and decided that, as this Thursday is the last day of our summer term, we would concentrate all our resources on the end-of-term wind-up debate here.

One of the other reasons why losing anything is to be regretted—I shall return to this because I will be on duty on Thursday—is that it is scandalous that we go away in July to come back in October. I have always taken the view—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not the motion before the House.

Simon Hughes: I am keeping my remarks in order by saying that if we do not have a debate on Thursday, as the motion proposes, we lose an opportunity that we cannot come back to, because there will not be another debate in Westminster Hall until October. I think that that is scandalous, and I think that the public think that it is scandalous. We should have debates here and in Westminster Hall, without huge periods elapsing between them.

I indicated that we will return to this matter on Thursday. I know that there has been consultation about the summer timetable, too. I just say, as an early shot across the bows, to the Deputy Leader of the House and her colleague, the Leader of the House, whom she knows I respect, that the Government will have to come back to these issues. I hope that under the new regime—new Prime Minister, Ministers, Leader of the House and Deputy Leader of the House—we will look again at the timetable and will not have occasions when we are asked to cut short our business and reduce the amount of time for debate and for holding the Government to account. I hope that the Government, in tune with what the new Prime Minister says, will give Parliament more opportunity to hold them to account, not just on the last days of the summer term, but on many other occasions.

Question put and agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Ordered,

That the Home Information Pack (No. 2) Regulations 2007 (S.I. 2007, No. 1667) and the Housing Act 2004 (Commencement No. 8) (England and Wales) Order 2007 (S.I. 2007, No. 1668) be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—*[Mr. Blizzard.]*

PETITION

Housing (Kettering)

9.7 pm

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Before I read out the petition, I want to pay a huge tribute to Mr. John and Mrs. Pat Brunige of 4 Warkton village, Kettering, who have laboured night and day to collect the signatures in association with the petition.

The petition states:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled

The humble petition of:

Mr. John Brunige and others of like disposition listed below, which in total number 5,359

Sheweth

That new housing development proposed for Kettering and its surrounding area will only be sustainable and of general benefit for the whole area if the necessary additional infrastructure to support the new population is put in place ahead of or in parallel with new housing construction

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House shall urge the Department of Communities and Local Government to consider the plight of Mr. Brunige and the other Petitioners and either bring forward firm plans to provide the necessary infrastructure or stop the housing expansion plans.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Biometric Data (Schools)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Blizzard.]*

9.9 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): In this country, thousands of schools are collecting fingerprints or other forms of biometric data from pupils as young as three. They are collected for registration, the lending of library books and the administration of school dinners. Several enterprising companies contact schools directly to sell these packages and the benefits that they bring. Yet the Department for Children, Families and Schools—

The Minister for Schools and Learners (Jim Knight): The Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Greg Mulholland: I accept the Minister's correction; it is something we are all getting used to. I congratulate him on retaining his job.

The new Department has no idea in how many schools this is happening. Despite the fact that unofficial surveys would suggest that it is taking place in every local education authority area in the country, the Government have no records of how many schools are collecting biometric data. That was revealed in an answer by the former Schools Minister, the right hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), in February 2006:

"We are aware that some schools do hold a photograph of pupils on their management information systems; use fingerprint scanners for the twice daily attendance registration of pupils; or use iris-scanners. However, my Department does not collect any information on how many schools use such equipment or hold photos or any other biometric data on their systems."—*[Official Report,* 27 February 2006; Vol. 443, c. 505W.]

Yet a survey conducted by the campaigning organisation Leave them Kids Alone has estimated that 3,500 primary and secondary schools now use biometric data systems and that approximately 750,000 children have been fingerprinted by their schools. It is estimated that 20 new schools a week are being added to those figures. Therefore, the issue needs to be addressed.

One thing is certain: we may not know how many schools this is happening in, but we do know that parents are often not being asked for consent and in many cases are not even being informed. Some schools will send a letter home—some do so before the system is introduced, some afterwards—but there is no requirement to do that. There is real concern among parents, parent groups and civil liberties organisations, which, I am afraid, up to this point has been ignored by the Government. Indeed, in responding to requests to devote parliamentary time to the issue, the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) said:

"I am not aware of the practice, but obviously people have accepted it."—*[Official Report,* 25 January 2007; Vol. 455, c. 1567.]

That is absolutely not the case. David Coulter, who runs Leave them Kids Alone, has reported that over 1,500 parents polled between July and September last year were against the use of fingerprinting systems. He has received more than 300 complaints from disaffected parents in one month alone.

I am delighted that finally—and, it seems, entirely coincidentally—the Department published the long-awaited guidance for schools on the issue today. That is welcome. However, as well as being overdue, it still leaves uncertainty as to the rights of parents and pupils to object, a point to which I shall return.

To give the background to the issue, biometric systems are being used for attendance, borrowing library books and cashless lunch systems. A form of biometric data such as a fingerprint or retinal image is collected and converted by an algorithm into a unique binary number. This is then stored in encrypted form and checked against the corresponding number every time the pupil places his thumb on a scanner allowing that pupil to borrow a library book or to buy lunch in the canteen. As a result of the encryption process, and because the fingerprint is stored as a number rather than a fingerprint, it is claimed by the companies who provide these systems that it cannot be reverse-engineered, and therefore, it is secure and not open to identity fraud or theft. However, that is not strictly accurate. Independent technology experts have stated that in their opinion it is impossible to say that data will remain secure. Advances in technology mean that it is inaccurate to say that it will not be possible to reverse-engineer the data stored in order to obtain the original fingerprint.

There is also concern about how the data is stored. It is generally stored on small school networks or stand-alone PCs, with the most basic level of firewall protection and anti-theft protection, or it is held by the agencies who provide the technologies—and we are talking, of course, about an industry that is unregulated. Further, as Action on Rights for Children points out, schools are not secure places. Theft of school equipment is alarmingly frequent and IT equipment is a magnet for thieves. The Metropolitan police recorded 7,500 school burglaries between 2000 and 2004. Outside London, local crime figures suggest that at least one school a day is burgled in each police area.

Andrew Clymer is a senior identity management security expert with more than eight years of experience working for organisations such as Cisco Systems, Visa, Fidelity and Merrill Lynch. He says

"There is an element of risk storing thumbprint"

templates

"on a school computer. No system can guarantee the security of information against future technology. Attempting to protect lifetime relevant information is extremely tricky and potentially costly."

Banks invest millions of pounds in constantly updating and adapting their security systems to prevent identity fraud, but how can schools be expected to do the same? However, unlike a bank personal identification number—PIN—biometric data cannot be changed in the event of theft or identity fraud, and a person's biometric data remains the same for a lifetime. Therefore, once stolen, it is compromised forever.

How long data is stored is also an issue. Schools act independently. Some might destroy the data they hold as soon as the child leaves school, but there is nothing to stop them keeping the data for longer, or permanently, if they have sufficient storage space. Not only does that raise questions about whether the data could be used by organisations, including the police or security services, in later life, or indeed while the child is still at school, it

[Greg Mulholland]

raises further concerns about the security of the data and the chance that it might be compromised.

There is also the question of whether biometric information collected in schools is prohibited by data protection legislation. The Government's defence is that the information stored is not sensitive, but how can that be the case? The data is unique to each individual. As plans are being drawn up to introduce cash machines that use biometric data such as fingerprints, not to mention biometric passports, how can the Government suggest that that is not sensitive data?

The fundamental issue, however, is that of parental consent—or rather the lack of it in respect of the collection of biometric data in schools. Many schools collect that data without directly consulting parents, never mind obtaining explicit parental permission. An online poll last summer of 1,400 parents by Leave Them Kids Alone found that 94 per cent. were against schools taking biometric data without parental consent. Many parents have contacted MPs and Ministers to express their outrage following their discovery that biometric data had been collected from their children without their knowledge, never mind their consent. Action on Rights for Children states:

"Given the seriousness of the issues involved, it is nothing short of astonishing that children's fingerprints are being taken without parental knowledge or consent."

Some parents have taken the step of withdrawing their children from systems such as cashless lunch arrangements, but that is not without consequence, and many parents fear that their children might be stigmatised or marginalised as a result. If parents were given the right to withdraw consent and did so to any extent, the use of biometric systems would be entirely undermined. An alternative system would need to be in place. However, instead of there needing to be two systems, why not have one system that works and that delivers the same benefits as biometric data systems, without issues and concerns?

The lack of guidance has been a concern. Regardless of what the Minister might say, there has been a U-turn. In an answer to a written question last year, the former Schools Minister said:

"My Department has issued no guidance to schools on the collection and recording of pupils' biometric information. In collecting data of this type the school is likely to rely on the broad powers contained in paragraph 3 of Schedule 1 of the Education Act 2002. This enables a governing body to do anything which appears to them to be necessary or expedient for the purposes of, or in connection with the conduct of the school."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2006; Vol. 443, c. 504W.]

Today, finally, the guidance is published. I welcome that, but it is six months after the Government said that they would publish it and it is very conveniently timed for this debate. However, the Government still have not fundamentally addressed the issue of whether parents have the right to be asked for consent: the guidance merely says that they should be asked. It is welcome that parents should be fully informed about how their children's biometric data will be used, what is involved, what data will be held and stored, why it is required, how it will be secured, and for how long it will be retained. However, the guidance critically fails to introduce a legal requirement for parental consent to be obtained before a child's biometric data can be collected. That is unacceptable, on such a critical issue that has so many ramifications for the children involved and the security of their personal data. The only way to resolve the problem is to introduce a legal requirement for consent.

The collection of biometric data by schools is not necessary. There are reasons why schools are buying such systems and why the companies are telling schools that it is a good idea to do so. They suggest reasons of efficiency; traceability, of library books, for example; or identification of pupils who qualify for free school meals without revealing that to other pupils. But all those could equally be achieved by swipe cards. It is interesting to note that swipe cards are 100 per cent. accurate when passed over a reader, but biometric systems such as fingerprint scanners are only 93 per cent. accurate. So they are less accurate than swipe cards and considerably more expensive.

Will the Minister clarify the situation regarding e-learning credits? There is some confusion about what part of such systems can or cannot be purchased with e-learning credits. Many parents feel that it is not an appropriate use of e-learning credits, but I would welcome the Minister's comments.

In conclusion, this is a real issue that needs to be addressed. I am glad that the Minister and the Department are taking it seriously and have finally published guidance.

It raises many issues, including those of security, consent and information, as well as benefit, necessity and cost. I mean cost not only in monetary terms, but in the possible ramifications and consequences of the introduction of that practice. The Government have been too slow to listen and too slow to act. They are finally engaging with the issue, but their response is still inadequate. It is not enough to say that parents should be consulted. They must be consulted, if biometric data, such as fingerprints, are to be taken from their children. Like a child's safety on a school trip, the collection of a child's fingerprints or other biometric data is enormously important, and should be treated with the same respect.

Given all the problems and concerns about the issue, which have been raised by parents, parents' groups and civil liberties groups over the past few months, I have come to the conclusion that the costs of introducing that technology into our schools utterly outweigh any positive benefits that may ensue. The collection of biometric data in our schools is unnecessary, intrusive and insecure. A can of worms has been opened and, as yet, the Government have failed adequately to close it. The situation is now a little clearer, but we want real clarity. The only way to achieve real clarity is for the Government to say that schools must always ask parents for consent before taking biometric data from children.

9.24 pm

The Minister for Schools and Learners (Jim Knight): I thank the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) for raising such an important issue. The subject has generated a great deal of debate, some controversy and a lot of mythology. The hon. Gentleman has written to me and questioned me several times about the issue, so I welcome this opportunity to try to

offer him further reassurance, although as he said the response was inadequate, he may have prejudged me.

For some time, I have been keen to publish guidance on how the secure use of biometric technologies can support efficient school management, and we did so today. The guidance was produced in consultation with the Information Commissioner. Once the debate was announced, I was determined to have the guidance published by today so that the debate could be informed by it, and I am grateful to officials and to the commissioner for their co-operation in ensuring that we could do so. The guidance was produced on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency—the Government agency that leads our national drive to improve learning through technology. I have placed a copy of the guidance in the Library and it will soon be available on the BECTA website. The Information Commissioner has also produced a complementary statement, which I shall ensure is available on the commissioner's website. Furthermore, Members will have noticed the publication of a written ministerial statement on the subject today.

The debate is driven by the legitimate need to ensure that the privacy of pupils is both respected and protected, but unfortunately it is characterised by some significant misconceptions and I hope that I can address them effectively today. It is important to clarify exactly what we mean by biometric data. The biometric element in this case, as the hon. Gentleman said, is an algorithmic representation of a fingerprint—not the recording of a fingerprint. It is extremely important that people understand that it is not the recording of a fingerprint, but the algorithmic representation of one.

In plain English, the technology derives a unique numerical value from a fingerprint—a number to identify an individual pupil. Images of actual fingerprints are neither created, nor are they stored. The number is linked to basic identifying data about the pupil such as their name and form. That means that biometric data stored by schools are of no more practical use than that stored on the swipe-card system to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Biometric data are in common use for security and identification purposes; indeed, I have fingerprint recognition on my laptop. Some schools see biometric technology as a practical solution to some of the day-to-day issues they face. In a number of instances, schools may find it helpful and effective to collect and use biometric data.

I have seen at first hand how such systems can help the running of schools—maintaining accurate attendance records, enabling cashless canteens to be introduced and maintaining accurate and efficient library records. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman said, there are alternative solutions for improving school management and administration, including the use of smartcards.

Smartcards are not without their own issues, however, as I saw recently on a visit to a school in Harrow. As happens in many other schools, a child's family is charged £5 every time a card is lost, which is a common occurrence and £5 that many families can ill afford—it is clearly much more difficult to lose one's finger. Not only can swipe cards easily be lost or forgotten, they can also be swapped between pupils, causing a particular problem for maintaining accurate attendance records, which could put the education and safety of our children at risk.

Using biometric data means that there are no cards to be lost. In addition, if the technology is used in the canteen, pupils no longer need to carry money, thus helping to reduce opportunities for bullying and theft. Cashless canteens, which can be facilitated by swipe cards, mean that it is not possible to tell who is receiving free school meals, thereby reducing stigma and increasing take-up.

It is up to schools to decide whether any of those systems will work for them. We certainly do not advocate one technology over another, or technology for technology's sake. We want schools to adopt it where it makes sense for them. The hon. Gentleman refers to answers from the then Schools Minister, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department that referred to the Education Act 2002. That Act enables governing bodies to do anything that is necessary or expedient for the purposes of, or in connection with, the conduct of the school or the provision of facilities or services. As a result, schools are free to use biometric technologies in the ways that I describe if they feel that it will help the school to run more smoothly, in accordance with data protection legislation and with regard to the guidance that we have issued.

I want to turn now to the concerns that have been raised about the implications for privacy. There are several safeguards in place that I want to draw to the attention of the House. First, the Data Protection Act 1998 protects against the improper use of all types of data, including biometric data. As part of their responsibilities under the Act, schools have a duty to ensure that personal data are kept secure. Today's additional guidance will make it clear how the law relates to biometric data and advise schools on how to comply with it. By law, such data can only be used for their stated purpose; they cannot be shared with third parties beyond that stated purpose, and they must be destroyed when pupils leave their schools. Some have raised concerns about, for example, the police using such data. Not only do we know of no circumstance where biometric data have been used by the police, but they could only access the data as part of an investigation into a specific crime. There certainly can be no read-across to other databases.

Schools already hold pupils' personal details. Information such as a pupil's address, date of birth and reports from social services are securely held as a matter of routine. I am sure that no one would argue that schools should not collect and store that information while pupils attend school. Many of those data are much more sensitive than an algorithmic number, generated by a fingerprint. Schools are used to holding such data securely and within the boundaries of the Data Protection Act 1998, and the introduction of biometric data does not represent a significant addition.

Schools and local authorities are responsible for developing their own policies about the information that they wish to collect and hold, subject to relevant legislation on data protection and freedom of information. There have been calls for the Government to introduce further regulation specifically to clarify how biometric data can be collected and used. As I have stated, that is already covered by existing legislation

[Jim Knight]

and is not necessary. It would also go against the essential principle of giving governing bodies the freedom to manage their school as they see fit, free from unnecessary interference from Whitehall, which is something that hon. Members on both sides of the House keep asking me to bear in mind.

Secondly, as I stated earlier, it is not possible to recreate a fingerprint using the numbers that are stored. The algorithm generates a unique number, producing no information of any use to identity thieves. I shall quote from a statement from the Information Commissioner's Office—a thoroughly independent source—that says in the third paragraph:

"Full fingerprint images are not stored and cannot be generated ('reverse engineered') from the template."

I hope that that is clear to all those listening, because it is an important reassurance on the points that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Thirdly, pupils and, where appropriate, parents must be fully informed of the data collected and kept, through a fair processing notice, as part of the data protection legislation. No data can be collected without their knowledge. That is common sense and a central principle of the guidance that we will publish tomorrow.

Fourthly, the use of biometric data in schools does not, as some say, edge us closer to a surveillance society any more than taking the register at the start of class ever has. By law, the data cannot be shared. There are no fingerprints to be handed to the police or stolen by anyone, nor any personal data that are not already held electronically by every school in the land.

This is technology introduced for the benefit of our pupils and teachers. It is not "1984" by the backdoor. There are no sinister forces at work here, and I would argue that it is irresponsible to suggest otherwise to get some cheap headlines.

I recognise, however, that although schools are acting legally and that all data collected will be handled in line with the Data Protection Act 1998, some parents may want further information. The guidance clearly lays out the legal position for schools. It advises head teachers on the practical and legal steps they need to follow if they decide to introduce the technologies. It will help schools to operate such systems, while respecting the wishes of pupils and parents who do not wish to participate. The guidance specifically recommends that schools give pupils and parents with genuine concerns the opportunity to opt out. Those who choose to do so should be offered an alternative means of accessing the same services. We have had some reassurance that the sorts of technology that might be used in the dining hall, the library, or for attendance could be interchanged with the use of swipe cards.

The guidance also encourages schools to be open and clear with parents, providing straightforward information on the nature and use of biometric technologies through a fair processing notice. I understand parents' concerns if they believe that images of their children's fingerprints are being taken and stored. That is a perfectly legitimate concern and I am sure that many of the parents to whom the hon. Gentleman referred are raising exactly that concern. It needs to be made clear to them that that is not the case: images of fingerprints are not being kept or stored. An algorithmic number is being generated from those fingerprints that cannot be reverse engineered.

I have seen how biometric data can have a very positive impact in schools. The technology does not put pupils' information at increased risk, nor does it imply a criminalisation of our children. It is the decision of the individual school, in consultation with parents, whether to introduce the technology. It is a way for head teachers to improve the administration and safety of their schools. For many, it may be common sense. I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman about the use of biometric data in schools.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 24 July 2007

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

NATIONAL TRUST (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL

Lords amendments considered and accordingly agreed to.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals Trust

1. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the future of services at Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals Trust. [151788]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): Proposals for on how to change services to improve care for patients are for the NHS to decide locally. On 28 June, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey primary care trust launched a full public consultation on proposals to improve health care in the area.

Mr. Dismore: While there are concerns about the nature of the consultation, it could provide a real opportunity to improve services in our area. There are fears that if there were movement of patients from Chase Farm to Barnet, the new improved services at Barnet would not be in place before any changes were implemented at Chase Farm. Can my hon. Friend assure me that new services will be provided before any changes are made?

Mr. Bradshaw: Yes, I can. I am pleased by the welcome that my hon. Friend gives the proposals. I know that he has been closely engaged, meeting both local health service managers and his constituents. I assure him that it is very important that changes that result from the local discussions are made only once the services to which he refers are in place.

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Con): I understand that the Healthcare Commission report states that the trust does not have an identified budget for infection control training and that attendance at infection control training is being monitored. The Government said in 2004 that 1 million staff would get training in infection control. Why is that not happening, and is the Government's decision to cut 10 per cent. from the education and training budget part of the reason for that failure?

Mr. Bradshaw: As the hon. Lady knows, there has been a 9.4 per cent. increase in funds available to PCTs in the last financial year. I take it that she was referring to the Healthcare Commission's report on hygiene standards at Barnet and Chase Farm—

Anne Milton *indicated assent.*

Mr. Bradshaw: The hon. Lady did not specify that, but I am glad that that is the case. We are concerned about that, and the commission also expressed its concern. As a result of its report, the trust is investing an extra £500,000 in cleaning wards, screening patients before admission and a prudent antibiotic prescribing policy.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Changes at Chase Farm hospital will have implications for other local hospitals, especially North Middlesex hospital in my constituency, which is just about to start a new PFI. Will my hon. Friend give me some reassurance that any changes that will have an impact on the North Middlesex hospital will be taken into account when that PFI gets under way?

Mr. Bradshaw: It is important that all elements of proposed changes, including the potential impact on PFI schemes, are taken into account when such service changes are proposed. I expect that my hon. Friend is already intensely engaged in the consultation process to ensure that his concerns about the impact on his constituency are made clear.

Patient Choice

2. **David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): What progress the Government has made in increasing patient choice within the NHS. [151789]

The Secretary of State for Health (Alan Johnson): Patients have a choice of four or more local hospitals for elective care and 114 other hospitals through extended choice. From April 2008, patients can choose any hospital that meets NHS standards and cost, beginning with orthopaedics this month. In June we launched the groundbreaking NHS choices information service.

David Tredinnick: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply and for writing to me about the regulation of Chinese medicine, which was helpful in setting a timetable. Does he accept that real problems are caused by the fact that demand from patients is out of sync with the supply of services, especially in complementary and alternative medicine? Primary care trusts are not listening to patient demand. The situation is well illustrated in London, where the Royal London homeopathic hospital, which provides a range of services that go way beyond homeopathy, is being cut. If the Secretary of State really believes in patient choice, which is to be his flagship with his new broom Front Benchers—*[Interruption.]* Well, there are some new brooms, because all the old Ministers were sacked—*[Interruption.]* Well, most of them—a large

proportion—were fired. Will the Secretary of State please consider issuing guidelines to primary care trusts to take patient choice into consideration?

Alan Johnson: In preparing to reply to this Adjournment debate, I looked carefully at the points the hon. Gentleman made in his letter to me but I am not persuaded of the need to issue guidelines at this time. It is clear to me that many more patients want the benefit of complementary and alternative medicine and therapies; indeed, the most recent survey showed a high percentage of patients looking for that. What general practitioners do is very much a matter for them; for instance, I understand that in the Newcastle primary care trust area 69 per cent. of GPs deal with complementary and alternative medicines, so I see no need to issue guidelines at this stage, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that such medicines are becoming an increasingly important part of GP prescriptions.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The technology driving some of the new health service systems has started to bite and is having a huge impact on our ability to improve patient choice, as well as delivering many other health benefit outcomes. With the departure, shortly, of Richard Granger, who has done such a splendid job on behalf of the NHS, will my right hon. Friend ensure that his replacement is of that calibre and that there is no shift in the Government's drive to improve health IT systems?

Alan Johnson: I shall meet Richard Granger just before his departure. My hon. Friend refers to an important area, where, as he says, we can extend patient choice and use new technology for the greater convenience of patients, citizens and clinicians, which is why it is important that we get the right person to replace Richard Granger.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): How does the Secretary of State square his Government's supposed notion of choice with the large-scale closure of maternity units, especially midwife-led units, thereby depriving many women of choice, particularly in Romsey and the New Forest?

Alan Johnson: There are two issues, the first of which is choice, which we want to extend. An important GP survey was published today and I made a written statement about it this morning. The second issue is maternity care, and recently, with the full support of the profession, we published "Maternity Matters", which makes it absolutely clear that—as in so many other aspects of medical care—we cannot simply defend the status quo. We need to ensure that we configure our services so that we save the lives of more babies; for instance, in Manchester—although there is still an issue of contention that has yet to be concluded—there are proposals by local health care specialists and local clinicians to save the lives of 40 babies a year. Such evidence cannot be disregarded.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): Are not more than 90 per cent. of people who use our hospitals satisfied and think that the service is good? Those who have criticisms want basic things such as better catering and cleaner facilities?

Alan Johnson: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. In addition, many patients would like to choose how they are operated on—for instance, non-invasive surgery. If their consultant is not au fait with the latest techniques and cannot carry out non-invasive surgery, the patient should be able to say, "I'm sorry but that's the kind of operation I want". That would be good not only for patient choice but for driving up standards among clinicians.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, it is the Government's promise that in two years' time every mother should be able to exercise full choice about the circumstances in which they give birth, be it in a consultant-led maternity unit, a midwife-led birth unit or at home. Will the Secretary of State tell us how many additional midwives he believes will be necessary over the next two years to deliver that promise of choice?

Alan Johnson: I cannot say that at this stage because it depends on how things pan out in every area, but it is clear that an increase in the number of midwives will be needed. If we are offering that choice to every woman in the country, we must ensure that we deliver on it with the right staffing in the right places, which means that we cannot pull a figure out of the air, but there is an area of consensus—even between the Treasury Bench and the Opposition Front Bench—on which we can work to make sure that things are properly implemented.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, but I am afraid that I cannot see how, locally, primary care trusts and hospitals can deliver the number of midwives that are necessary unless there is at least some work force planning to make that happen. The number of midwives, and the number of training places in midwifery, went down in each of the past two years, and the Secretary of State must know that in the past five years the number of live births has gone up by 13 per cent., whereas the number of full-time-equivalent midwives has gone up by only 5 per cent. We are therefore more than 1,000 short of where we need to be now, let alone where we need to be in order to extend choice in two years' time. So will the Secretary of State promise today that he will go back and look at "Maternity Matters" and put some of the work force planning into "Maternity Matters" that simply was not there?

Alan Johnson: I think the hon. Gentleman is right in his assumption that we will need to get the work force right. He is also right that this is non-negotiable; it has to be in place by the end of 2009. He is also right in pointing out that there has been an increase in the number of midwives since we entered government. Putting all that together, I undertake to ensure that we have the proper work force planning in place at the right time to ensure that we can meet the commitments set out in "Maternity Matters".

Scalding Injuries

3. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on reducing scalding injuries in the home. [151790]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Dawn Primarolo): I am not aware of any specific discussions with ministerial colleagues on reducing scalding within the home. However, the Department of Health supports policies and initiatives aimed at reducing and preventing the incidence of these injuries.

Mary Creagh: Keith Judkins, consultant anaesthetist at Pinderfields hospital in Wakefield and a member of the British Burn Association, tells me that every year 600 cases of first-degree burns are admitted to hospital, most of which involve children under five who have fallen into scalding hot bathwater, and each year 20 people die. A consultation to look at installing thermostatic mixing valves in the home is currently ongoing with the Department for Communities and Local Government. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that huge emotional and physical trauma costs, as well as the costs to the NHS, are taken into account in any analysis of whether to proceed with that measure?

Dawn Primarolo: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who has worked incredibly hard on ensuring that this campaign is drawn to our attention. I confirm to her that submissions will be made on that during the review of part G of the building regulations. I would go further and say to her that a vital role is also played by the third sector, and organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. We need to look again at how they are operating. None the less, I agree that both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, and the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), as part of his responsibilities for older people, need to consider how we can address the shocking figures that she draws to our attention.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Of course, elderly people are also affected by scalding, and one of the most effective ways of dealing with that is to get more help into elderly people's homes. Does the Minister share my concern that this year, because of the underfunding of Shropshire primary care trust, the taxpayers of Shropshire, through Shropshire county council, will have to pay an extra £650,000 for community care? Will she agree to meet me and a delegation of other Shropshire MPs to discuss this issue?

Dawn Primarolo: Surely the hon. Gentleman will accept that the PCT in his area has actually seen an increase in funding. Surely he would also accept that in dealing with this very important issue we need to look at resources in local government, in the health service and in the third sector and ensure that there is a proper response to advice and support, particularly for the vulnerable. Surely he also accepts that he cannot come to the House and support a party that wants to cut spending on the national health service and then plead for more money for his constituency.

NHS Review

4. **Mr. David Anderson** (Blaydon) (Lab): What discussions will be held with trade unions in the course of the NHS review conducted by Sir Ara Darzi. [151791]

The Secretary of State for Health (Alan Johnson): Lord Darzi and I are already discussing a range of issues with staff, patients, the public and key stakeholders including the trade unions both locally and nationally to ensure their full involvement in the NHS next stage review.

Mr. Anderson: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. I advise him that the work of the trade unions in the past 10 years in helping to put in place the NHS plan and "Agenda for Change" is a model that should be adapted in the review, so that the unions continue to play a comprehensive and supportive role in making the NHS even better than it is today.

Alan Johnson: I agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, Lord Darzi was in his constituency yesterday, while visiting Gateshead PCT, which might be just outside his constituency. He has also met the leaders of all the major trade unions, and I very much agree with my hon. Friend that the trade union input has been positive throughout the NHS plan and all the events over the past 10 years. This is a huge opportunity for us to re-engage with the work force, which includes, of course, their trade unions.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Representatives of the midwives told the Oxfordshire health overview and scrutiny committee the other day that proposals to downgrade services at Horton hospital from consultant-led to midwife-led were utterly unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State and his team listen to the advice of the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of Nursing on those reconfiguration proposals, or will they simply be brushed to one side?

Alan Johnson: They will not be brushed to one side, and the hon. Gentleman knows full well that those proposals are local and are led by clinicians locally. I announced in my first week in this role that I would pass on all cases referred to me by the overview and scrutiny committee to the independent reconfiguration panel, which is clinician-led, because it is very important that those issues are driven locally, by clinicians in the area. The Royal College of Midwives, which has been to see me already, has very eloquent spokespeople on this issue, and they will be listened to—of course, they will—but as for my involvement, it is right that politicians stay back and allow those working in the health service and those responsible for health care to lead the proposals.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I inform my right hon. Friend that one of my local newspapers claims to have a leaked e-mail from a middle manager of the Queen Mary's hospital trust that sets out plans to downgrade accident and emergency services, close maternity and paediatric services and make cuts of £60 million? Such headlines will make it very difficult for Lord Ara Darzi to enter into a meaningful dialogue with local people and consult on the shape of future local services. What is Lord Darzi doing to address those speculative headlines, which are making it very difficult to have a meaningful dialogue about the future of our services?

Alan Johnson: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, because such headlines are totally unhelpful. *[Interruption.]* Of course, they are driven in part by the Conservative party's opportunism. I shall give an example of the paradox. A couple of weeks ago, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) used an Opposition day to debate the very important issue of stroke care—it is absolutely essential that we debate such issues—and he quoted a National Audit Office report that came out in 2006 and said that, as a result of more efficient practice, £20 million could be saved annually, 550 deaths avoided and more than 1,700 people would fully recover who would previously have been disabled for life. We therefore have to change the health service to provide those kind of services. However, at the same time as pushing that, the Conservatives ask us for a moratorium on any change whatsoever. There cannot be such a moratorium, and we need to deal with the issues that my hon. Friend raises, not in headlines but in proper deliberative debate. That is what the Darzi review is all about.

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State encourage Lord Darzi to engage one to one with all MPs in whose areas things are likely to change?

Alan Johnson: I will encourage Lord Darzi to deal on a one-to-one basis with all MPs. I am writing to all MPs to let them know where Lord Darzi, David Nicholson and the other 60 clinicians will be over the summer period, so that if any MP wants to turn up and perhaps give up a couple of days in Tuscany, he or she can go there and chat to him at leisure.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): May I refer the Secretary of State to his Department's press release on ministerial responsibilities? Under Lord Darzi's name, it says:

"Lords business is being covered by a Lords Whip."

I understand that Lord Darzi intends to spend little time in the other place, not to deal with any legislation and to answer few questions. Given that he is embarking on a fairly fundamental review of how the health service operates, dealing with the sort of issues raised by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson), how on earth is Parliament supposed to hold him to account? Is this not precisely the sort of arrangement that the new Prime Minister indicated he opposed, whereby, effectively, Parliament is being sidelined?

Alan Johnson: With due respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that that is the primary concern about health services. My belief is that Baroness Royall will cover many of the questions. She will be accountable on behalf of the Government. I know that the hon. Gentleman thinks a lot about these things. It is to everyone's benefit to have someone of the reputation and skill of Lord Darzi, who will continue to practise two days a week, as well as meeting MPs individually and doing all the other things. He will continue to be a leading clinician in the health service and he will carry out the review, which will take up an awful lot of his time. It is innovative that not only do we have a clinician of his standing to lead the review—along with many other clinicians—we also have him as a Minister to ensure that, unlike with the Turner report or the Leitch report, we have someone in Government to carry the report through. That is of more interest to the public than who is answering questions in the Lords.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I draw the Secretary of State back to the original question and ask him about his discussions with Unison in relation to the cuts around the country? Recently, the Secretary of State was quoted in the *Health Service Journal* as saying:

"We have listened a bit too much to the British Medical Association and not enough to unions like Unison."

Interestingly enough, I agree with him. Perhaps he would like to listen to Karen Jennings, who is Unison's head of health, and who said:

"These 600 compulsory redundancies will resonate across the NHS and strike fear into the hearts of local communities."

The cuts are based on deficits, not clinical care. Will the Secretary of State step in and stop those cuts, which are affecting care in our hospitals?

Alan Johnson: First, may I welcome the hon. Gentleman, who is making his first outing at the Dispatch Box? I disagree profoundly with him and with other Opposition Members on this issue. As I understand it, they are asking for a moratorium on any change. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I read the seven steps. Step one was to have a moratorium on reconfigurations. Indeed—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the Secretary of State reply.

Alan Johnson: Indeed, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), who I believe represents David Cameron's Conservatives—I am not sure whether that is the same party as the one to which the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) belongs—called at Prime Minister's questions, on the back of the London review, for absolutely no further changes. Of course Opposition Members like to put out scare stories—that is part of their politics at the moment. However, the policy issue is that, with advances in medical science and new technology, and with changes in demography, we have to change our health service when it comes to issues such as stroke care, which we debated a couple of weeks ago, in order to save more lives. It would be perverse if we were to put a moratorium on saving lives.

Accident and Emergency Departments

5. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): How many accident and emergency departments are planned to be downgraded; and if he will make a statement. [151793]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): Any proposals for major changes to services are for the national health service locally and are designed to improve care for patients.

There is a well-established and well-understood process for managing consultations on such proposals so that patients, staff, the public and other local stakeholders can have their say and help to inform decisions.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Will he therefore undertake to publish the clinical basis on which the Government justify their decision to increase the minimum catchment area for an accident and emergency department from 300,000, as recommended by the Royal College of Surgeons, to 450,000, as recommended apparently by no one apart from his own Department, and explain how, by coincidence, that fits in with the proposed population that would arise if the accident and emergency department at Queen Mary's Sidcup were to be closed, as revealed in a memo that was written by NHS officials and not by any Member of the House?

Mr. Bradshaw: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman wait for the proposals that we are expecting from his local area. I am sure that once local health managers in his area publish those proposals, they will justify them on clinical grounds. A recent statement from the British Association of Emergency Medicine recommended that, in order to provide safe emergency services around the clock,

"there needs to be immediate access to intensive care, anaesthetics, acute medicine, general surgery and orthopaedic trauma".

For the best use of resources, a figure of 450,000 was indeed mentioned, but this is not a one-size-fits-all issue. It will depend on the local circumstances. He should wait for the local consultation.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My hon. Friend may be aware that a not very sophisticated game is going on, with some members of some political parties in this House announcing that A and E departments are going to close when there is no question of them even being considered for closure. Immediately after an election, however, those same hon. Members suddenly announce that the departments have been saved. I hope that my hon. Friend will be a little less magisterial and a little more political and tell us firmly which A and E departments are going to close and which are unquestionably not going to. In that way, he will be doing us all a favour.

Mr. Bradshaw: I do not think that I have ever been described as magisterial before, and I am always happy to be as political as Mr. Speaker will allow. Many of these decisions are made at local level and not by me, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that an awful lot of stir-mongering and scaremongering is going on out there. I could quote a number of examples, such as the A and E department at the Hinchingbrooke health care trust in Huntingdon. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) confidently predicted that that facility would close but, following recent consultation, a decision has been taken not to close it.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): Will the Minister acknowledge that there has been no scaremongering in respect of the Princess Royal hospital in Haywards Heath, which is part of the West Sussex PCT? It has been proposed that the hospital's A and E department be closed and its maternity services withdrawn. Clinicians and local GPs feel that that would be unsafe and unwise, although they accept that other reconfigurations need to be made. Therefore, will he assure me that the PCT will be forbidden from going ahead with the proposals?

Mr. Bradshaw: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said already that he will pass on to the independent review panel any proposed changes referred to by local scrutiny committees. He and I have both said that it is very important for patients and local Members of Parliament to engage in the consultation process, and that clinical concerns about proposals should be made plain. However, the driving force behind all the changes is the objective of improving care for patients. The technology is changing and, to save lives, local care should be given where that is possible and necessary.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is no doubt aware of last Friday's shocking decision by the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust to withdraw from the Pathway project, which will have a devastating effect on service provision in Leicestershire. What steps is he taking to reassure the public and local Members of Parliament that services will be protected? When was he told of the decision, and will he meet a delegation of hon. Members to discuss this very important matter?

Mr. Bradshaw: I should be happy to meet such a delegation, and I have already offered to meet my hon. Friend and the former Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt). The decision is shocking, yes, but perhaps not so surprising, given that the project's projected costs had spiralled considerably. I can well understand the concern that he expresses on behalf of the people of Leicester, but I am assured by the local health service management that the funds originally proposed to be spent on the project will still be available to improve services in Leicester, and I look forward to examining, with my hon. Friend and others, how that can best be done for the future.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I cannot even start to describe how angry doctors, nurses, unions and patients in Scarborough are after last week's announcement of 600 job losses at Scarborough hospital. That is one third of the hospital's staff. Will the Minister come to Scarborough this summer to see for himself the effects that the cuts are going to have, and to let us convince him that we need to maintain full A and E cover at that hospital?

Mr. Bradshaw: As far as I understand it, discussions on the proposals that the hon. Gentleman mentions have not even begun yet, but I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen), who is responsible for the heath service in the north-east, would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and the delegation to discuss the issue. As we said earlier, a difficult, tough decision was taken last year by our predecessor team. For years and years, we had a system in which a small number of health trusts were allowed simply to roll over deficits from one year to another, and well-performing trusts had to bail them out from year to year, but that is not acceptable or sustainable.

Tough and painful decisions have had to be made in some areas, but I am sure that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be happy to discuss them with the hon. Gentleman.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the emerging strategy used in some parts of the country, and particularly in the capital city, is for health authorities to require the diversion of trauma and complex emergency cases away from accident and emergency departments to private hospitals and elsewhere? That kicks the feet away from accident and emergency departments that are already threatened, and brings about the closures that the bureaucrats want.

Mr. Bradshaw: No—and the decisions are best left to the people whose job it is to deliver high-quality care, at value, to their local communities in a safe and appropriate way. If my hon. Friend wants to write to me with any examples of cases where there are such fears, and where that is having an impact on the quality of patient care, I will gladly respond to him.

NHS Reconfiguration

6. **Mr. Douglas Carswell** (Harwich) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the reconfiguration of the NHS. [151794]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): The NHS is changing because medicine and treatments are changing. If we do not keep up with the times, services will not keep on improving. Local services are changing for the benefit of patients, and that is what the NHS is there to ensure. That may mean changes to how surgery is delivered, who is admitted to hospital, and how effective community care is. There are so many issues involved in reconfiguration, which can make a huge improvement to patient care.

Mr. Carswell: Will the Minister give an assurance to my constituents, 9,000 of whom have signed a petition on the subject, that reconfiguration will not mean the closure of the Peter Bruff ward in Clacton and District hospital?

Ann Keen: What is important to local people is the consultation. I am aware that the hon. Gentleman was involved in that and has met representatives from his primary care trust to discuss the issue. That is what I encourage him to do, because that is what he believes in. He believes in local accountability, and that is what he has in his constituency. As a founder member of the Cornerstone group, surely he agrees with removing decision making from Whitehall and making it into local accountability.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford) (Lab): In order to maximise the effectiveness of the health service, we have to ensure that we use to the full the considerable talents available to us in the NHS staff base. Has my hon. Friend yet had a chance to look at the all-party pharmacy group report on the future of pharmacy, and has she been able to make an assessment of how pharmacists could take the pressure off general practitioners and accident and emergency departments to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the health service?

Ann Keen: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Of course the skills mix in the health service is crucial to the changes that we can make to patient care. The advancements that pharmacists have brought about for us by operating out of health centres in larger supermarkets, and by being there to advise on many health issues, has generally improved the health of patients. As my hon. Friend said, the skills mix is crucial to future work force planning and the delivery of care for NHS patients.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last week, the *Worthing Herald* reported that Worthing's accident and emergency department had 1,258 admissions. That equates to 65,500 people visiting every year. Under reconfiguration proposals—not scare stories—the PCT proposes to close that accident and emergency department, and it expects people to join the car park that is the A27 and go to either Chichester or Brighton. How many of those people does the Minister believe are timewasters who do not actually need an accident and emergency department in the hospital of the largest town in Sussex?

Ann Keen: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue on accident and emergency services, but how could I possibly know who was attending the accident and emergency department without looking at the figures? I would expect the local management and the local PCT to do that, and I would expect the local MP to conduct a responsible consultation to ensure that patient care is delivered appropriately in the accident and emergency department. That is why reconfiguration of the health service can be good for patients, as I am sure he would agree.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): As NHS configuration depends not just on clinical judgments and local opinion but on the financial consequences of the tariff system, does the Department have any proposals to review the tariff regime, which almost certainly undervalues accident and emergency work relative to specialist surgery?

Ann Keen: All areas are for review, all areas are being consulted on and everything must be looked at to make sure that we are delivering good, effective patient care.

In-vitro Fertilisation

7. **Mr. Brian Jenkins** (Tamworth) (Lab): What the average cost of in-vitro fertilisation treatment in the NHS was in (a) cash and (b) real terms in each of the past 10 years. [151795]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Dawn Primarolo): The Department does not collect information on that expenditure.

Mr. Jenkins: I am sorry to hear that because my right hon. Friend must be aware that there are claims that regulation has added greatly to the cost of providing that treatment. Will she comment on the fact that regulation adds greatly to the cost?

Dawn Primarolo: I agree with my hon. Friend that regulation, which is very important in this area for safety, does increase costs. In the NHS those would be met from the clinical budget. I confirm that I am taking steps to ensure that information on the provision of IVF by each primary care trust, including information on local criteria, expenditure, social access and work on IVF, is available to us. The Department will make available later today the details of that work, which is funded by the Department in partnership with the Infertility Network UK to address the very points that my hon. Friend raises.

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Women in Basingstoke still have to wait until they are 36 years of age to receive IVF treatment. For some who cannot readily conceive, that will mean more than a decade's wait. What is the value of NICE guidelines to the residents of Basingstoke when the Hampshire primary care trust can so readily ignore them?

Dawn Primarolo: I am sure that the hon. Lady is putting her powerful argument to the PCT as it decides its spending on IVF—*[Interruption.]* If she calms down for a moment, I will tell her that I sympathise with the concerns that she raises about inequitable access to IVF, which is why I am undertaking work to make sure that all the access criteria and other issues that are raised in regard to IVF are properly dealt with in the local area. She should return to her PCT and make her powerful case to it, as I will do as the Health Minister.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): When the survey is complete, will my right hon. Friend publish information about when each PCT will meet the NICE guideline that was published years ago?

Dawn Primarolo: Certainly, that would have to be part of the consideration. Some PCTs offer one cycle, and there is dispute about whether it is a complete cycle, while others offer different types of treatment. Those are matters that we will need to consider.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I think that I heard the right hon. Lady refer to the need for the proper expression of criteria on the subject in the local area. As a matter of principle, does she believe that such treatment should be uniform across the country or the subject of local discretion?

Dawn Primarolo: I believe that it is the role of a Health Minister, along with those who advise NICE, to set the standards for equitable access across the country. That would always be mitigated by local decisions on expenditure after proper consultation, but the matter that needs to be addressed now is what is available, how much it costs and how it varies across PCTs, and then how to deal with an issue that is important to so many people in this country.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that the science and practice of IVF treatment has moved on. More and more, there is a desire for single embryo transfer, which would reduce health hazards and be beneficial for both mothers and babies. The point has been made around the Chamber today that until we have a clear statement from the Minister about what one full cycle is—whether that is three single embryo transfers and whether that would be universally acceptable—single embryo transfer will not happen.

Dawn Primarolo: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who are members of the all-party group on infertility, which today published an excellent report covering many of those areas and which I have had a chance to consider. With regard to her specific point, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is considering the matter and is to advise me of the precise points that are raised in the report. I will certainly make that information available to Parliament when I have it.

Patient Safety

8. **Roger Berry** (Kingswood) (Lab): What action has been taken to ensure that people with a learning disability are safeguarded in the NHS since the publication of the National Patient Safety Agency's 2004 report, "Understanding the patient safety issues for people with learning disabilities". [151796]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Ivan Lewis): We have taken a number of steps, including the NPSA published guidance on supporting adults who have learning disabilities and swallowing difficulties; the Healthcare Commission audit of learning disability services; our work on developing a response to the report from the Disability Rights Commission; the establishment of an independent inquiry following Mencap's report, "Death by Indifference"; and our commitment to refresh the White Paper, "Valuing People".

Roger Berry: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's reply. The health inequalities of people with a learning disability have been well known for many years, thanks to the work of the Government, Mencap, the DRC and many others. What plans do the Government have to introduce annual health checks for people with a learning disability, and how is the treatment of those people to be monitored and evaluated?

Mr. Lewis: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend—that has been a source of concern for some considerable time. We have evidence that the system is nowhere near good enough in terms of access to primary and acute NHS care. There is a commitment on the table to regular screening of people with learning disabilities, particularly where they are at high risk of particular health conditions. For example, we have had discussions with GPs as part of contractual negotiations on the question of a guaranteed commitment to screening. Unfortunately, thus far we have not been able to reach agreement on that issue, but it remains Government policy. Ensuring that the NHS, at every level, takes its responsibilities to treat people with learning disabilities as it would treat any other patient is a top priority—that is non-negotiable. We need to look at all the levers that are available to us to ensure that primary care and acute services treat people with learning disabilities as equal citizens as regards accessing the health service.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): It is common for people with Down's syndrome to have heart defects—they are born that way. In 1997, it was very difficult to get those conditions treated in the NHS. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Down's Syndrome Association on carrying out its vigorous campaign in the early days of this Government, which has helped to change the culture of the NHS and introduce training for medical students about people with all learning difficulties?

Mr. Lewis: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The access of people with Down's syndrome to specialist heart care is absolutely crucial to their longevity and quality of life. A constituent of mine, Mr. Alan Quinn, has a daughter with a learning disability and Down's syndrome who recently went into Alder Hey hospital for such heart surgery and had excellent NHS care. He is regularly keeping me updated with her progress. There have been tremendous advances in that specialist support, particularly for people with Down's syndrome, but we need to do a lot better.

Dental Health

9. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the state of dental health in England. [151797]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I thank my hon. Friend for her question, which gives me the opportunity to say that oral health in England is the best since records began. The proportion of 12-year-old children with decayed teeth fell from 93 per cent. in 1973 to 38 per cent. in 2003. Over a similar period the number, of adults with no natural teeth fell from 38 per cent. to 11 per cent. of the adult population.

Charlotte Atkins: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to her new role, which is richly deserved. Does she recognise the beneficial effects of fluoridated water to dental health, given the stark contrast between the good dental health of children in the fluoridated Birmingham area and that of those in the Manchester area, which is not fluoridated? What will she do to encourage strategic health authorities to promote fluoridation in areas where tooth decay among children is unacceptably high? After 2008, for the very first time, the British Fluoridation Society will no longer benefit from central funding. I am concerned that strategic health authorities are falling behind—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister will manage a reply.

Ann Keen: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I agree that fluoridation of water offers the best prospect of reducing inequalities in oral health. That is why we have amended relevant legislation to give local communities a real choice on whether to have fluoridated water. I congratulate her on becoming known as a champion by the British Fluoridation Society, and for the work that it has done. Strategic health authorities will have guidance from our Department, but the consultation will remain local. I am pleased to say that funding has been acquired until the point at which we look at the issue again, but I assure her that we shall monitor the situation carefully.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Oral hygiene in England is of the highest standard, partly because of the advances of medical science. However, does the Minister agree that unless we can find a way of reviving the provision of dental hygiene on the national health service—in a county such as Wiltshire, it is virtually non-existent—those high standards of oral health will inevitably decline?

Ann Keen: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the work he has done in the area of dental care. Oral hygiene is paramount to the prevention of decay, and we have continued to train and re-train technologists and dental hygienists, and to encourage local PCTs to get involved in the commissioning of such work.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend to her new role. I am sure that she agrees that better dental health would be helped by better NHS provision, particularly in our poorer communities. I recently met a constituent who is training to be a dentist, and wishes to be an NHS dentist, but the practice she is placed with, which does NHS work, will take her on only if she solely does private work. That is because the NHS now pays for procedure, and newly qualified dentists take too long to do them. Is it not time that the Department considered requiring newly trained dentists to spend part of their career in the NHS? Otherwise, what is the point of the taxpayer paying to increase the number of training places?

Ann Keen: My hon. Friend raises a good point. The contract that has been put in place recently is working well, but there is always room to consider everything and make progress, so I am very interested in his remarks.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) (LD): The Minister's predecessor, along with Teignbridge district council, the Teignbridge primary care trust, myself and a local dentist, helped to provide good quality dental care for anyone in Teignbridge who wanted it. I congratulate her predecessor's work for the Department on that. The new Devon primary care trust, however, is telling dentists in Teignbridge that they have to take new patients from anywhere in the county, which will undo all the good work of her predecessor. Will she consider that issue and find a way to protect the services provided by the dentists of Teignbridge to local residents?

Ann Keen: I suggest that as the local Member of Parliament, the hon. Gentleman engage in a serious conversation with the PCT and that a consultation is carried out with the local community. I am sure that that would help them to decide their future.

NHS Dentistry

10. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the provision of NHS dentistry in local health centres. [151798]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): Primary care trusts salaried dentists already provide services for patients in some health

centres and I agree that including a wider range of NHS primary care dental services would definitely benefit patients. The dental reforms launched last year give primary care trusts greater flexibility to locate NHS dental practices in health centres—a practice with which I firmly agree.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new position. Does she agree that one of the traditional problems with retaining dentists in the national health service is that some choose to build up a practice using the NHS, only to turn around and tell their patients that they are going private, and that if they want to keep their dentists they must go private, too. The Stapleford care centre in my constituency has retained the surgery and has dentists working there on condition that, if they leave the NHS, they must also leave the surgery. I commend that as a model of retaining dentists in the NHS.

Ann Keen: I thank my hon. Friend for that information. Stapleford health centre should be congratulated. It is good policy and practice, and the way in which health care could and should be delivered in future, when health centres share not only dentists, but pharmacists and all the aspects of health care that the community requires. That forms part of some reconfigurations, and is certainly part of Lord Ara Darzi's review.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): The Norfolk local dental committee told me that the new dental contract is "a shambles". It also stated:

"In order to receive funding, Dentists are required to meet Government targets that leave them without the time they would like to spend on patients to provide appropriate preventative care."

How would the Under-Secretary answer dentists in my constituency who feel let down by the system?

Ann Keen: The hon. Gentleman should engage with the dentists and the PCTs. I am happy to accept any correspondence from him and give any assistance, if I can.

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey) (Lab): In autumn this year, a new local improvement finance trust—LIFT—health centre opens in Yeadon in my constituency. Will my hon. Friend ensure that Leeds PCT takes all the appropriate steps to provide the two dental chairs that have long been promised to tackle the shortage of NHS treatment in the area?

Ann Keen: I suggest that the PCT look at excellent examples that are in progress throughout the country. I am happy to direct the PCT to examine those at any time my hon. Friend likes.

Children's Palliative Care/Hospice Services

11. **Bob Spink** (Castle Point) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the funding of children's palliative care and children's hospices. [151799]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Ivan Lewis): The Department has received 22 representations on the funding of children's palliative care and children's hospices in the past six months.

Bob Spink: I know that the Under-Secretary will join me in paying the warmest possible tribute to those who work in and volunteer for children's palliative care. I am grateful to the former Prime Minister for his personal help in getting the £27 million stop-gap funding and the review of funding for children's hospices.

The Association for Children's Palliative Care and the Association of Children's Hospices want children's palliative care services to be included in the national indicator for disabled children that is currently being developed as part of the public service agreements for the next comprehensive spending review. Will the Under-Secretary delight the House by saying today that he will consider that suggestion favourably? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Lewis: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State says, I always delight the House. It is a good sign when the Secretary of State says that, but I am not sure whether any other hon. Members would agree. Although I might delight the House with such a commitment, it could be a seriously career-limiting announcement. Of course, decisions about PSAs will be made in the context of our comprehensive spending review settlement. However, the £27 million that we have made available, the independent review that we have commissioned and our commitment to publish a national strategy on palliative care for children, alongside the significant investment in supporting disabled children and their families, mean that the specific needs of palliative care for children will have a high priority in the period ahead.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): To be realistic, given that the Government have broken their promise and failed to fulfil their manifesto commitment to double investment for palliative care, broken the former Chancellor's compact with the voluntary sector by using charitable gifts to subsidise NHS care, broken their promise to implement payment by results for palliative care and continue to insult children's hospices by funding them at 4.5 per cent. compared with 32 per cent. for adult hospices, will the Under-Secretary now steal and implement our policies of equal funding for children's hospices and a national tariff for palliative care?

Mr. Lewis: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's point is that the Conservative party makes all sorts of uncosted spending commitments while simultaneously suggesting that it will cut taxes if it ever returns to power. That is an entirely disingenuous position. When the Conservative party was in power, hospices were expected to depend far more heavily on charitable donations. The Government have started to make significant state investment available for hospices for the first time, including a recent major capital investment. There is much more to do, but we will take no lessons from the Conservative party on hospice funding.

Infection Control

12. **Greg Mulholland** (Leeds, North-West) (LD): What plans he has to improve infection control in the NHS. [151800]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): We already have the hygiene code

and an action programme to tackle health care-associated infections, including MRSA. However, the issue remains a priority, and we recently announced an extra £50 million to support local initiatives for front-line staff.

Greg Mulholland: I thank the Minister for her answer and I am pleased to hear that the issue is a priority. May I draw her and the House's attention to the situation in our care homes, where cases of MRSA and clostridium difficile have doubled in recent years? Does the Department have any plans to tackle that growing problem or is it another case where, as with the report on nutritional standards in care homes, the needs of our elderly people in care homes are not being met?

Ann Keen: The needs of elderly people in our care homes are a high priority, and they always will be to me. We have doubled our teams to help in acute trusts. We need to look at the same co-operation with social services for care homes because the incidence of MRSA in them is far too high. We have a lot to do on training and skills to see how we can correct that.

Sustainable Railways

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Ruth Kelly): With permission, I would like to make a statement about how the Government intend to strengthen the country's railways over the next seven years and beyond. Our proposal is the most ambitious strategy for growth on the railways in more than 50 years. This statement is being made against a background not of decline or crisis, as in the past, but of remarkable success for our railway network.

Of course, anyone who travels regularly by rail, as many of us in the House do, will know that big challenges remain before our country has the rail system that it needs. There is no room for complacency, but the measures put in place since the Hatfield tragedy mean that our railways are safer than ever before. Reliability, which declined sharply after Hatfield, is improving strongly on most lines and passenger satisfaction has improved. There has been sustained investment in the network, such as in the modernisation of the west coast main line and in new rolling stock. The result is that more freight and more people are travelling by rail than at any time for 50 years.

Our challenge today is not about managing decline. Instead, it is about how we can build on that solid progress to provide a railway that carries more passengers on more and better trains, and on more frequent, reliable, safe and affordable services. That needs the Government, working with the industry, the regulator and passenger groups, to take action in three main areas: first, to secure continued improvements in safety and reliability; secondly, to achieve a major increase in capacity to meet rising demand; and, thirdly, to deliver sustained investment through a fair deal for passengers and the taxpayer. Let me take each in turn.

Safety has improved and reliability is back to the levels seen before Hatfield, even though we are running many more trains. Those who work on our railways deserve credit for their focus. The White Paper sets out how we intend to continue reducing the risks to passengers and staff on our railways. We also intend to build on the improvements in reliability. Currently, 88 per cent. of services arrive on time. By 2014, I want that figure to reach 92.6 per cent., through investment in new rolling stock, maintenance and equipment, which would make our railway one of the most reliable in Europe. For the first time, we will require the industry to concentrate on cutting by one quarter delays of more than 30 minutes, which cause the most inconvenience to passengers.

As safety and reliability have improved, passenger numbers have increased, and overcrowding has become a real issue for many commuters. The White Paper contains the biggest single commitment for a generation to increasing the capacity of the railway through more services and longer trains. By 2014, we will have invested £10 billion to make this happen. Starting now, and over the next seven years, we will see: 1,300 new carriages to ease overcrowding in London and other cities such as Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds and Manchester; £600 million of investment to tackle bottlenecks at Birmingham New Street and Reading stations; the £5.5 billion transformation of Thameslink, which provides a vital north-south artery into and across London; and new plans put in place for the development of each of our main lines, including the next generation of inter-city trains and signalling. The Government are also committed to ensuring that we close no rural lines in this period.

This continued investment will provide nearly 100,000 new seats for passengers on inter-city and commuter trains to our major cities. Our proposals will accommodate a further seven years of record passenger growth and, at the same time, start to tackle some of the worst overcrowding on some of our busiest services. There will be some 14,500 more seats in the peak hour on Thameslink alone and, while Crossrail remains subject to financial and parliamentary approval, it has the potential to deliver a similar scale of improvement for east-west services in the capital.

The White Paper also outlines other improvements that groups such as Passenger Focus tell us passengers want. These include a radical simplification of the fares structure and the modernisation of tickets to allow people to use smartcards; a further £150 million to be spent on 150 stations in the towns and cities outside London that form the backbone of the national network; better and safer stations from Wolverhampton to Dartmouth, Cleethorpes to Swansea, and Barking to Chester; and support for Transport 2000's idea of local station plans so that people can better access the railway and make it part of a greener travel choice. We are also investing £200 million in a strategic freight network that will help to reduce the congestion on our roads and the environmental impact of moving goods.

Sustained investment will be needed to underpin all this. Having fought its way back on to a stable financial footing following the demise of Railtrack, it is essential that the industry maintain financial discipline. Both passengers and taxpayers have suffered the consequences of financial crises, and we will not allow a return to those days. The challenge is to deliver the sustained investment that the rail system needs while continuing to protect passengers, but we must also strike a fair balance between the call on taxpayers and fare payers. We are determined to continue to protect passengers, so any increases in regulated ticket prices will remain capped at the retail prices index plus 1 per cent. Such tickets account for over half the use of the railway and include season tickets and saver fares.

There has been some recent debate about unregulated fares, which operators can vary to respond to customer demand. Some unregulated ticket prices have therefore increased. I will monitor this closely and today I am committing to give Passenger Focus more say in the specification of future franchises before they are tendered. At the same time, many other tickets have been discounted. In fact, about 80 per cent. of passengers do not use the headline-catching first and peak tickets, but buy either a regulated ticket or a discounted product. A significant number of those fares have fallen in real terms over the past 10 years, with many deals cheaper in cash terms than they were under British Rail.

The result is that many more people are now choosing to travel by rail—some 340 million more passengers each year than in 1997. This strong growth

[Ruth Kelly]

also means that the railways need less taxpayer subsidy. In the difficult years of Railtrack, it was the taxpayer who footed the bill. The proportion of subsidy funding nearly doubled in five years. It is right that we now seek to return it closer to historic levels. I believe that we are meeting our goals of protecting passengers and achieving a fair balance between the taxpayer and the travelling public, while delivering the necessary investment that we all agree is necessary.

Today's White Paper sets out our ambition for a railway capable of carrying double the number of passengers and twice the amount of freight by 2030, with modern trains and a network whose reliability and safety are among the best in Europe. This is not a White Paper that rests on distant promises of all-or-nothing projects. Schemes such as new north-south lines may have their place, and we will consider them if and as the need arises. This is a strategy that seeks to deliver real improvements that reflect passengers' priorities and that builds on the real achievements and successes of our rail system over the past decade.

Twenty-five years ago, our railways were advertising "This is the age of the train", but it was against a background of falling demand and chronic underinvestment in trains and infrastructure. Perhaps that claim was premature. If we can build on the progress of the past 10 years, with sustained investment and increased capacity while harnessing the full environmental gains of rail transport, we will be entering a new and exciting era of rail travel. This White Paper is a resounding vote of confidence in Britain's railways and I commend it to the House.

Mrs. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): First, may I say that we welcome progress on Thameslink, Birmingham New Street, Reading and longer trains and platforms, but that I fear that the House should restrain its enthusiasm until we have seen contracts signed and the work actually under way?

I have to press the Secretary of State on a number of important issues. When it comes to Thameslink, Birmingham and Reading, has the budget definitely been committed for the whole of those projects or are they dependent in any way on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review? Is the whole of Thameslink 2000 now fully funded or only the northern parts? Are the 300 new carriages trailed today part of the re-announced inter-city express programme or are they in addition to it? Does the Secretary of State intend to keep the cap on saver fares or not?

Above all, what has happened to Crossrail? The Secretary of State told us that she does not believe in distant promises, but yet again it is another false dawn for Crossrail, which is getting more distant by the day. Apparently, it does not feature in the Government's plan for the next 30 years of our rail system—despite announcement after announcement by Ministers, despite £254 million spent on preparation and despite a clear commitment from the previous Prime Minister. Today's statement is a slap in the face for Londoners and for the City of London, for which no amount of warm words from the Prime Minister can possibly make up.

The point is that we have heard all of this before. Today's hefty slab of paper is the latest in a long line of ever denser and longer strategies, reports and initiatives on transport from this Government. If the travelling public could get around on paper promises, there would be no delays, no overcrowding and everyone's journey into work would be blissfully smooth every day—but they cannot. In the last year alone, we have seen commuters go on strike, toilets ripped out of carriages to provide extra standing room and fares hiked by 20 per cent. on a main route into London.

The reality is that the Government have announced and re-announced virtually all the initiatives that the Secretary of State has outlined today. We were promised Thameslink 2000 so long ago that the former Deputy Prime Minister was still in charge of transport—never mind Thameslink 2000; at this rate, it will be more aptly named Thameslink 3000. Even now, we are getting only part of the scheme that was promised. As for Birmingham New Street, the Government pledged to tackle bottlenecks in the west midlands seven years ago. Longer platforms and 1,000 of the 1,300 carriages mentioned today were actually promised last year. Not one of those projects has been delivered, so why should we believe the Secretary of State now?

The Blair years have been a litany of broken promises, from which the current Prime Minister cannot distance himself. What about the three-and-a-half hour journey time from Edinburgh that we were promised, or the light rail schemes in Liverpool and Leeds, not to mention the north-south high speed line? What happened to the pledge on safe and secure travel when there has been a 43 per cent. increase in the number of victims of violence recorded by the British Transport police? And this is a good one: seven years ago, the Government promised "improved commuter services", "less overcrowding" and "reduced delays"; today's announcement is therefore an admission of their complete failure to fulfil that promise. Even after fiddling the timetables to meet limp public performance measure targets, more than one in 10 trains in this country run late.

Thousands of commuters face standing for their entire journey every day of the working week. The overcrowding that blights lines into our major cities is reaching a crisis point that is seriously undermining our quality of life and competitiveness both north and south. The Secretary of State claims real achievements and successes today: well, tell that to the commuters packed so tight in the morning rush hour that if it were animals being transported, it would be a criminal offence to move them in those conditions. Tell that to the passengers on the 6.35 Bedwyn to Paddington service or on the 7.59 Durham to Newcastle service or indeed on any of the other lines that suffer from chronic overcrowding.

We now come to the biggest let-down of all. Let us remember what the Government's 10-year plan promised:

"We will seek real reductions in the cost of rail travel".

Each of the three latest franchises awarded by the Department for Transport will clobber customers with fare rises of nearly 30 per cent. by 2015. Many families are feeling the pinch because of stratospheric fare increases—racing ahead of inflation—inflicted by the

Department. In the light of the increases that we have seen over recent years, today's announcement of a fair deal for passengers is, frankly, laughable. The one thing we can guarantee from the Government's plans for the railway is that there are more rail fare hikes to come. They try to point the finger of blame at the train operating companies, but the real culprit is the Secretary of State, who now has a more intrusive role in our railways than in the days of British Rail.

Today does not usher in a new era on our transport system any more than the rest of the reports, strategies and studies that we have had from the Government in the past decade. The truth is that the Prime Minister cannot blame anyone but himself for the state of our transport system, because the extortionate fare increases for grossly overcrowded trains are his fare increases. The transport broken promises are his broken promises. The Metronet public-private partnership fiasco is definitely his personal fiasco, and the transport failures of the past decade are all his failures.

Ruth Kelly: For a moment, I thought that the hon. Lady might actually welcome some aspects of the White Paper. However, I must proclaim myself disappointed. I thought that she might welcome the significant progress that has been made on our railways. I thought that, for once, we might have a constructive and forward-looking approach. I am very disappointed that she is mimicking the approach of her predecessor, who admitted that, in the Tory party,

"we've not had a clear transport strategy"

in recent years and that

"we've had tactical positions".

The absence of long-term strategic thinking is characteristic of today's Tory party.

Let me deal with the specific questions that the hon. Lady asked at the beginning of her comments. *[Interruption.]* She asked a few, I tell my hon. Friends. She asked whether Birmingham New Street, Reading and Thameslink were fully funded. They are fully funded in the next output period. She asked whether the 300 carriages were in addition to the 1,000 already announced. They are in addition. Nearly 50 of the 1,000 were accounted for by inter-city carriages. She asked whether saver fares would stay regulated. It is intended to have regulated fares, although, as passengers want a simplified fare structure, it is right that we introduce clear categories of fares that apply across the railways and that everyone can understand. In fact, if we ask passengers what they want, we find that they want to be able readily to compare prices and to know that they are getting value for money. That is what we intend to enable.

The hon. Lady suggests that there is nothing in the White Paper apart from previous promises. She seems to have forgotten some of the history—it was this Government who had to clear up the mess of the botched privatisation. Network Rail has managed to get a grip on costs for the first time, so we can enter the new funding period seeing steady growth, improvements on reliability, on safety, on performance and a massive investment in new capacity. I wonder what her alternative would be.

The hon. Lady says that we have not committed today to Crossrail. The Government are committed to that project, which would enhance capacity on the main east-west corridor and ease crowding on services to Paddington and Liverpool Street. As she well knows, the Crossrail Bill is being debated in Parliament and we are considering whether Government funding can be matched with private sector funding. As the Chancellor recently said of the private sector contribution,

"The verbals are great and if we could cash them in, we'd probably be building two Crossrails"

by now. We must pin that commitment down.

The hon. Lady accuses the Government of ripping seats out of trains, but, as a result of the White Paper, 100,000 more seats will be added to trains. How many will be ripped out? Zero.

The hon. Lady asked why there is no north-south high-speed rail link. I certainly do not make any apology for that. Our approach is based on making targeted investments in the services that matter most for today's passengers. We do not want to spend huge sums of taxpayers' and fare payers' money on risky, expensive technologies that do not deliver what we need to meet passenger demand. I am surprised that it is her policy to commit to a north-south high-speed rail link. *[Interruption.]* If it is the policy of the Conservative party, perhaps it should be honest and say so, rather than the hon. Lady now trying from a sedentary position to dissociate herself from it.

Let me deal with fares. I am pleased that the hon. Lady has today backed off the policy that she held only a few days ago of challenging the idea of premiums from train companies being invested to achieve the capacity that our railway system needs. It is important that we get the balance between the interests of taxpayers and fare payers right, but also that we deliver the investment in capacity that rail travellers need. If the hon. Lady has an alternative to our proposals, I would like her to stand up and state what it is, because I have heard nothing today that challenges our position.

This is the most positive statement in 50 years on the growth and development of Britain's railways. It sets out in detail what we commit to doing over the next seven years to 2014, as well as our long-term strategy—and it also goes beyond that. In order to address the long-term transport challenges we face, hard choices are required, not warm words. The Tories do not even offer a credible Opposition, let alone a programme for Government.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Government have poured in large sums of money to rebuild the system and have started with a clear view, and they are to be congratulated on coming forward with a strategic policy to cover the next 20 years. However, the Secretary of State will still be dependent on many privatised monopolies running under unimaginative franchises for the delivery of the policy, and she might like to examine where the additional capacity will come from, how many of those companies are capable of delivering that, and how we can plan for a good fare structure when so many of them are determined not to let their passengers know where advantages lie.

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

Let me also say that if the Secretary of State gives me the entire £150 million to employ a good architect to rebuild Crewe station, I could deliver for her a sparkling 21st century station of which we would all be proud.

Ruth Kelly: I will certainly consider that as the first representation on how the £150 million should be spent. As my hon. Friend knows, we will now go through a process of iteration with the industry—Network Rail and the train operating companies—on how the money can best be spent to deliver the additional capacity that is needed. We will involve Passenger Focus before the future franchises are re-tendered and let so that it can have a say on fare policy and other specifications that are of concern to passengers.

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): The statement has been a disappointment. There has been a failure to recognise that there is huge pent-up demand for rail. Those of us who truly believe in the green agenda and saw the statement as providing a chance to divert passengers from air and road to rail consider it to be a missed opportunity. I therefore wish to ask the Secretary of State a number of questions.

What is new in the statement—what has not been announced before in the 10-year Transport Plan 2000, the Strategic Rail Authority plan 2002 or the Network Rail business plan 2007? What new funds have been committed over and above what has previously been announced? The director general of the Association of Train Operating Companies, George Muir, has said that funding for longer trains can be expected to come from "growing passenger revenues". What proportion of that will come from increases in passenger numbers and what from increases in passenger fares? Some commuters have experienced 20 per cent. fare increases. What are the statement's implications for unregulated fares, and for increases in them?

The Secretary of State said that no seats would be taken out to provide additional capacity. Will she pass that information on to South West Trains, which seems hellbent on removing seats from stock on the lines that pass through my constituency?

An answer to a question I tabled earlier this month contained the admission that the cost of driving had decreased by 10 per cent. in real terms over the past 30 years while the cost of using buses and the railways had increased by more than 50 per cent. Given the importance of climate change, as highlighted in the Stern report, how much will be diverted from internal flights and roads to rail? What shift of freight from road to rail will there be under the strategy? Is the £200 million new money, and what will it buy us?

Which of the bottlenecks identified in the Network Rail business plan 2007 are not addressed or funded in this strategy? Thinking of my own constituency, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could tell us what is to happen to Waterloo and Eurostar. It is extraordinary that we did not have more detail on Crossrail, especially when the opportunity presented itself to confirm the Government's commitment to adequate funding to take the project forward.

Given that the 2005 Labour manifesto promised us high-speed rail, why are the Government ignoring the Atkins report on high-speed rail that has already shown that north-south capacity around Birmingham will reach capacity by 2014? That presents only a tentative possibility of looking at that line seriously.

I note that the Secretary of State promises better and safer stations from Wolverhampton to Dartmouth. She might be interested to know, from Wikipedia, that no railway has ever run to Dartmouth. The town does have a railway station, but it is now a restaurant. There is a steam railway that runs Thomas the Tank Engine. I make those remarks simply to try to illustrate that there is so much in this report that is clever phrasing: will the Secretary of State be kind enough to tell us what it will actually deliver?

Ruth Kelly: I am also disappointed by the hon. Lady's contribution. She gave no recognition to the fact that the White Paper will deliver safer, more reliable trains. It targets investment on those lines where overcrowding is worst and will allow passenger demand to grow by 22.5 per cent. over the next seven years, so that 180 million more people can use the train every year—a huge contribution, not only to the environment, but to the economy.

The hon. Lady asks what is new in the White Paper. I can tell her what is new—1,300 new carriages and the major projects, such as £5.5 billion on Thameslink. The hon. Lady went back to the 10-year plan, and I will deal with that. The 10-year plan was launched before Railtrack spiralled out of control as a result of the botched privatisation, which is, as I am sure all hon. Members would now agree, a credible analysis of the situation. Network Rail has now regained control and, for the first time in recent history, we are entering a period in which we can predict safely both a rising number of passengers using the train and significantly funded investments that are deliverable. Of course the rail regulator will assure himself of that before we commit to, for example, precisely where the 1,300 extra carriages will go. There is also the £550 million investment in Birmingham New Street and Reading stations, the £150 million for medium-sized stations up and down the country, and improvements to track and infrastructure across the railway.

The hon. Lady asked two questions about the implications for fares. As a result of Railtrack and the botched privatisation of British Rail, the taxpayer subsidy rose significantly towards 50 per cent. last year. It is right that as costs are re-gripped and taken under control by Network Rail the level of taxpayer subsidy should fall towards historic levels. As a result of the strategy that we publish today, we envisage that that will reduce towards 26 per cent. in line with historic norms.

It is right too to recognise—I hope that the hon. Lady does so—that 80 per cent. of passengers now use regulated fares, which are capped at RPI plus 1 per cent. Some discounted fares are significantly cheaper, even in cash terms, than they were in 1997. Indeed, the average price per kilometre travelled has risen by only 3 per cent. in real terms since 1991.

The hon. Lady asked about the environment. The biggest single impact that we can have on the environment is by providing more capacity for

passengers to use the railways. The White Paper is geared not only towards improving reliability, but to significant and major investment in delivering greater capacity. The industry has committed itself to come up with carbon reduction targets by next year, and for the next output control period we will set—alongside safety, reliability and performance targets—specific carbon targets and commitments.

The hon. Lady asks about added seats. I have already said, in answer to the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers), that 100,000 new seats will be added as a result of the significant investment we are making. She asks about freight. We are confident that rail freight will continue to grow over the next 10 to 15 years and that we can use the productivity element of the transport innovation fund as a potential funding stream to enhance the strategic freight network. We are making available an extra £200 million for the development of the strategic network.

The hon. Lady asks about the high speed rail link. Such a link would cost £30 billion and would not be delivered for 20 years, but it is right that we examine the case for it and that we continue to explore options and keep it under review. If we had £30 billion—the hon. Lady may have that much money but I do not at present—there are ways of spending it that will better deliver more, and sooner, for current passengers than a high speed rail link could ever do. If the economics or the environmental calculations change, it is right that we consider them in due course. The railway White Paper and the funding statement will deliver an improved railway for today's passengers and accommodate an increase in demand of almost a quarter over the next seven years. That should be welcomed.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle) (Lab): If my right hon. Friend wants to see the difference between a Labour Government and a Conservative Government running the railways, she should look at the west coast main line. Will the extra carriages announced today mean that each Pendolino train will have an extra two carriages? I am rather disappointed at my right hon. Friend's dismissal of high speed lines. We have a high speed line that works—from the channel to St. Pancras—so there must be a case for a north-south line, because there will be major capacity problems on the west coast main line by 2014.

Ruth Kelly: I hear my hon. Friend's representations on behalf of the west coast main line. I know how important the project is to him, and the modernisation of the west coast main line will of course continue during this funding period. Precisely where the extra carriages will go will become clearer after negotiations with the industry, which will continue over the next few months. I know, too, of my hon. Friend's commitment to the north-south high speed rail link. If we had £30 billion we could have funded the equivalent of the west coast modernisation several times over. The issue for the Government is what the best use of that money is today. In future, the environmental or economic calculations may change so it is right that the Government keep the matter under review, but today is not the right time to make a commitment.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): While I wait with bated breath for tomorrow's statement on motherhood and apple pie, will the right hon. Lady tell me what I can tell my constituents who use Wolverhampton station? Precisely how much of the £150 million will be spent on the station? When will it be spent and what will be done with the money? May we have some specifics?

Ruth Kelly: From a sedentary position, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State whispered that we had the motherhood statement last week, so I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman makes the case for Wolverhampton, and I acknowledged in my statement that Wolverhampton should be funded for infrastructure improvements. They are, of course, the responsibility of Network Rail but I understand that Wolverhampton has an extremely strong case.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Labour party in Scotland made proposals for operating train passenger services on a not-for-profit basis. Will the Government consider allowing Network Rail to operate passenger services on a not-for-profit basis, particularly where franchises are failing?

Ruth Kelly: When the railway is entering an unprecedented era of growth, it would not be right for the Government to suggest that the answer to any concerns about railways is to restructure them. Network Rail has never advanced a proposition for running not-for-profit railway services, but if at any time it did so, the Government would consider the proposal.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): In her statement the Secretary of State announced increases in the capacity of the railway system, and the House always welcomes such statements. She said that over the next seven years we will see

"the £5.5 billion transformation of Thameslink".

Is she aware that I also announced the go-ahead for Thameslink? If she looks at *Hansard* for 27 February 1996, she will see that I said:

"On current plans, Thameslink 2000 services can be expected to start within six years."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 1996; Vol. 272, c. 724.]

Who has been holding it up?

Ruth Kelly: Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman had his own role to play in failing to deliver Thameslink, but today I can say for the first time that the Government have set the money aside to fund the Thameslink programme. The first improvements should come on before the end of the control period that we have set the funds aside for today, and there will be further improvements in due course.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): May I say how much we welcome the improvements in the west coast main line? Labour Members who travel on it regularly know what a real difference it has made. But in looking at the plan ahead, will my right hon. Friend look at the role of local services, because if we have the extra use on the west coast main line, we need to

[Joan Walley]

improve local services along the line? It is no use just having an improved Crewe station if we do not have the improved services right the way east-west cross-country. Will she meet the north Staffordshire community railway group, who I met yesterday, to discuss passenger transport, to see how we can develop the investment in local services that are needed in north Staffordshire?

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, South (Mr. Harris), has already offered to meet her and a delegation on this issue. It is important that we develop local services, and indeed rural services where there is demand for those services. This is the first White Paper that I know of that has said on the Government's behalf that there will be no closures on local or rural lines. We have also set aside some of the new carriages to meet increasing demand on those lines if that demand occurs, but my hon. Friend will be very happy to meet her to discuss it.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the works to convert platforms at Waterloo International for domestic use by December 2008 will now go ahead under these plans? Can she also confirm that her Department will now press ahead urgently with the feasibility studies that are required into all other options at Waterloo and its approach routes, to remove all bottlenecks to the use of longer trains, which is the only way to remove the overcrowding suffered by so many on London suburban routes?

Ruth Kelly: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that Waterloo is identified as one of the railway stations in London that need significant infrastructure to enhance their capacity. He mentions the feasibility options that could enhance that further. I think it is right that we take time to consider those. I am very happy to meet him to discuss them if that would be useful.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has raised the issue of regulated, unregulated and discounted tickets, but will she impress on the rail companies the need to use modern technologies such as smartcards and mobile phones for the sale of those tickets?

Ruth Kelly: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. I understand that the first franchise that will offer the use of smartcards will be delivered in 2009, and following on from that experience we intend to see smartcards introduced right across the network. They have the potential really to simplify the experience for the passenger in the future.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) (Con): When will the bottleneck at London Bridge be dealt with?

Ruth Kelly: London Bridge is one of the stations that has also been identified in the output period, so between 2009 and 2014 there should be improvements in that service too.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): I represent the inner-London commuters who get on the trains when the carriages are already full and the seats already taken, so I warmly welcome the 1,300 extra carriages and the 100,000 extra seats. If my right hon. Friend wants to do even more to ease congestion in central London, will she also ensure that Transport for London is funded to proceed with the routes that avoid the centre of London, such as London Overground and the East London line phase 2, which will connect Clapham Junction to the tube system?

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend makes his case very eloquently. Of course, I will consult him and, indeed, other interested parties during the development of those lines.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Con): I welcome much of what the right hon. Lady has told the House this afternoon—in particular, her clear admission that the nationalised railways suffered from chronic under-investment in trains and infrastructure. From that, the House can only infer that she now admits that privatisation was absolutely necessary and that any of the improvements that have occurred in the past 10 years could never have happened without the investment that privatisation brought. Will she now admit that the political interference of the past 10 years, particularly that brought about during the reign of the former Deputy Prime Minister, has held back the progress that could have been made but has not been made in the past 10 years?

Ruth Kelly: I was preparing myself to congratulate the hon. Lady on her wisdom, but I do not think that her comments will have much resonance with the public if she says that the success of the railway was somehow to do with privatisation, rather than recognising the fact that Railtrack lost control of costs altogether and that it was ultimately the taxpayer who ended up footing the bill of an additional £1.25 billion a year before we had to introduce Network Rail to regain control of costs and to start to make improvements in our railway system.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to rural lines, which will certainly please the residents of Barton-upon-Humber in my constituency. With all due respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), I will fight her tooth and nail to ensure that Cleethorpes gets a fair share of the £150 million for station refurbishment. However, are there any plans to increase the capacity on the trans-Pennine route, which services Cleethorpes?

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I hope that she will have noted that Cleethorpes is one of the stations that is likely to benefit from infrastructure improvements, and I am sure that she will continue to press her case over the coming months. It is right that, over the next few months, the Government take time to consider where the investment for that additional capacity is best directed—where the extra carriages will go. I hear what she says about the trans-Pennine express. We will consult the rail regulator, Network Rail and the train

operating companies to decide where those carriages are best targeted and come back to the House with a plan by January.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): I welcome the extra investment in Cardiff, Reading and Birmingham New Street, which will be very good news for passengers in many parts of my country. However, is there any intention in the White Paper to devolve further powers over the railways to the Welsh Government? In the last White Paper, that happened with Scotland and included responsibility for London to Glasgow and Edinburgh services operating in Scotland. That has not happened in Wales, with the result that 60 per cent. of inter-city services in south Wales, for example, are entirely unaccountable to the Welsh Assembly Government. Will she agree to hold an urgent meeting with the new Transport Minister in the Welsh Assembly Government, who, as luck would have it, is the leader of my party?

Ruth Kelly: I am certainly glad that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the investment in Cardiff station, which will receive £20 million to improve its infrastructure, thus also relieving the bottleneck at Reading station, where very significant investment will transform Reading station's potential to operate as an interchange and improve the reliability of all the train services in Wales and elsewhere that use Reading. I am afraid that I cannot promise him that I will somehow reopen the devolution settlement today, but I hope that he rests assured that we take the interests of his constituents seriously.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): At least one of the two Reading MPs is here to applaud the Secretary of State for having the wisdom and foresight to announce the long-awaited upgrade of Reading station. It will improve platform capacity, deliver service improvements and help to tackle the chronic overcrowding that is making commuting such a misery on the First Great Western main line, but is she aware that it will also remove the dreadful Cow lane bottlenecks, which are a blockage in west Reading for both motorists and bus passengers? The statement is a win-win for Reading and a win-win for Labour.

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and pay tribute to him. Over the past few months—indeed longer than that: over the past five years—he has championed the cause of his constituents and made a strong case on behalf of all commuters who use Reading station or whose train line depends on Reading station. The £425 million that the Government are committing today will transform the prospects of people using Reading station and will improve the frequency and reliability of trains into London.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con): Has the Secretary of State had a chance to visit Derby station? If she has, she will have seen that the platforms look like a setting from world war two. When will Derby station be refurbished?

Ruth Kelly: I have had the opportunity to visit Derby station and the right hon. Gentleman makes his case with passion. Today's White Paper commits the Government to £150 million for 150 medium-sized stations. There is also other funding available for stations that do not qualify as the top 150 priorities. It is for Network Rail, together with the train operating companies, to decide what the priorities are and I am sure that he will continue to make his case to them.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to Thameslink, which serves my constituency and is the line on which I have commuted for 38 years—perhaps I should declare an interest. The £5.5 billion for Thameslink contrasts rather markedly with the £200 million committed to rail freight. Will she give further thought to more substantial investment in rail freight, particularly on strategic routes? That would not just take traffic off our road, but might take freight traffic off fast main line passenger routes and free them up for faster and more frequent passenger trains.

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw the attention of the House to the importance of freight and the need to deliver a strategic freight network that will allow the use of freight rail services to increase over the next seven years. The Government's £200 million will really help that process. There are those who argue that we should have dedicated freight lines—I think that he is one of them. The issue for the Government is how to make the best value-for-money investments while delivering the objectives. I understand that not only do strategic dedicated freight lines cost a significant amount of money, they do not maximise the potential to relieve congestion on the busiest routes, because they do not alter the peak hours commuter congestion periods on passenger lines. We have to target our money appropriately to make the best use of it, but of course we keep the issues under review.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Seven years ago, in the 10-year plan, the Government said that they would bring forward schemes to ease bottlenecks, particularly in the west midlands. Will the right hon. Lady look carefully at the rail service and facilities improvement plan generated by my borough of Walsall, which highlights the Stourbridge-Walsall-Lichfield line? It connects Walsall with Stourbridge and thence the south and south-west, and with Brownhills and Lichfield for connections to Yorkshire and the north-east. The former Strategic Rail Authority in its land use planning guide cited the line as a potential capacity provider to ease congestion across the west midlands rail network. Anything that the Secretary of State can do to bring forward the revival of the Brownhills-to-Lichfield line, and so on, would be mightily welcome.

Ruth Kelly: I will of course look at any proposal that an hon. Member puts before me, but I urge the hon. Gentleman to think about the potential costs of any improvements that he may suggest, because, ultimately, they have to be funded either by the taxpayer or by the fare payer—or we will be unable to deliver the investment. I have yet to hear a plausible exposition of an Opposition policy that would enable greater investment in capacity.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I warmly welcome the proposal to invest £425 million in Reading station, but will my right hon. Friend please make sure that the beneficiaries of that investment are not just passengers who live to the west of Reading, but those on the inner commuter lines of First Great Western? In my constituency, for example, three years ago there were 10 fast trains to Paddington during the morning peak; now there are four.

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend makes her case well. I can assure her that the very significant investment at Reading station will have implications for her constituents, and I expect the reliability of trains on those routes to improve as a result of it.

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): I, too, welcome the investment in Reading station. It will certainly improve services to the west as, absurdly, the bottleneck means that the fast train to Bristol is frequent held up at Reading, even though it is not even meant to stop there. However, will the Secretary of State consider bringing forward investment in and around Bristol Temple Meads station? Resignalisation of the lines in the area will enable the underused branch network around the city, including the Severn Beech line, to be expanded, and the line to Portishead to be reopened. That would reduce significantly the number of cars coming into Bristol city centre, and the carbon emissions that they cause.

Ruth Kelly: The Government, in conjunction with Network Rail and the train operating companies, always take seriously questions to do with whether a rail line should be reopened, whether extra carriages should be added to a particular service or whether a station needs to be enhanced to deliver improvements. However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman has cleared his plea for more money with his Front Bench, as I do not yet understand how the Liberal Democrat sums add up.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East) (Lab): Whether it is for reasons of economic efficiency, global warming or simple traveller comfort, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right to give priority to investment in the railways over the next seven years and beyond. I do not want to reopen the debate about the devolution settlement, but she has considerable influence in Scotland and I put it to her that the provision of a modern rail connection into Glasgow and Edinburgh airports has to be a priority. Will she use her good offices to encourage the Scottish Executive, the railway interests and BAA, the airports' owner, to make that investment?

Ruth Kelly: I am afraid that I cannot give my right hon. Friend that assurance. He knows that those issues are for the Scottish Executive and not Westminster politicians—

Dr. Strang: What about the airports? Aviation is a Westminster responsibility.

Ruth Kelly: Where airlines have a particular responsibility, it is clear that there are commercial decisions that also need to be made.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Like other hon. Members, I have been lobbying on my constituents' behalf in respect of the First Great Western main line, so the news about the improvements at Reading is very welcome. Will the Secretary of State say when they will be completed, and update us on other important improvements, such as increasing capacity at Oxford and improving access to Paddington? Finally, what is the prospect of getting a station at Grove?

Ruth Kelly: It is remarkable how representations from Opposition Back Benchers differ so profoundly from what Front Bench say. Opposition Back Benchers have welcomed what is in today's White Paper, and even added to the proposals by asking for more investment and capacity improvements, but I have yet to hear those on the Front Bench make a credible proposition about how they would fund the improvements. We have set aside more than £425 million for Reading station in the control period from 2009 to 2014. That will deliver significant improvements for the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The proposals in the White Paper will be widely welcomed, but is my right hon. Friend aware that, for Londoners, the test of the rail strategy will be what happens with Crossrail, which has been promised for so long? We know that the Government are committed to Crossrail and that the necessary legislation is going through, but the project's credibility among Londoners will depend on their being able to see concrete funding plans. When Crossrail is in place, perhaps we can move on to Crossrail 2, with the underground being taken all the way from Hackney's glittering spires to downtown Chelsea.

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend is right that Crossrail is incredibly important to relieving overcrowding at some of London's busiest stations and on the tube, and that it could make a real strategic contribution to passenger movements across London. The Crossrail Bill is going through the process of being considered by the House, but in the meantime it is right that the Government work with the private sector to try and make sure that the project is affordable and properly financed.

Christine Russell (City of Chester) (Lab): The very welcome refurbishment of Chester station has commenced, and in the past 12 months there has been a 30 per cent. increase in the number of passengers using the station. However, that has highlighted the real need for additional car parking there. Many of my constituents drive to Crewe or Runcorn to catch the train, so will my right hon. Friend look at trying to speed up the provision of extra car parking?

Ruth Kelly: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. Chester will benefit significantly from the proposals that I have set before the House. She mentioned car parking, an issue that is being raised with increasing regularity across the country as demand for rail services increases. On the whole, such issues are dealt with by Network Rail in conjunction with the relevant local authority. I am sure that she is making her representations to those bodies directly, but of course I am happy to pass them on.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that for the first time in many years, my constituents in Worcestershire can plan their journeys to London and Oxford with complete confidence, because the railway line is closed, thanks to the floods? Will she use this respite period to put pressure on First Great Western to improve its abysmal level of service, and on Network Rail to improve its infrastructure and maintenance work on the line, and to bring forward as quickly as possible the business case for the redoubling of the line between Worcester and Oxford?

Ruth Kelly: I assure the hon. Gentleman that as recently as last Thursday, First Great Western met my hon. Friend the Rail Minister. First Great Western has an improvement strategy in place. I hope to see it commit to delivering on its franchise agreement, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and other Members of the House would welcome that.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the reiteration of support for the railway network. Will the Secretary of State say something about reopening the many closed railway lines in England, and the possibility of reopening enough routes to allow an east-west line to be formed? That has long been campaigned for, would not be expensive to introduce, and would mean a huge improvement to passenger and freight networks. Will she give us some hope on the question of when that might happen?

Ruth Kelly: I have to tell my hon. Friend that those are predominantly issues for Network Rail. It has the necessary planning powers in place to put aside disused rail lines for future growth purposes, if it thinks that that is the right thing to do. It considers proposals on a case-by-case basis, and I am sure that it will have heard my hon. Friend's representations.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): I notice that the statement said that there is to be a welcome focus on passengers, and a greater involvement with future franchises. Given the unhappiness with the First Capital Connect franchise, will there be any revision or renegotiation of franchises about which people are deeply unhappy?

Ruth Kelly: I can tell the hon. Lady that the franchises currently in operation are already delivering benefits for passengers. We hope to improve on that in the coming seven years as we accommodate a massive increase in demand—180 million more people are to travel by rail every year. Of course, as we go forward, we want to make sure that passenger concerns are right at the heart of the franchising process. That is why I intend to make sure that Passenger Focus has more input in specifying the franchises in future.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend go for a truly integrated transport system, and do more about car parking facilities in all stations? I have travelled the length and breadth of the country, and no station that I visit has the necessary car parking facilities. Will part of the £100 million, or £150 million, which has been designated for 150 stations go on car parking?

Ruth Kelly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that local authorities ought to have integrated transport plans that take into account not only bus usage, but local train stations, how people access those stations, how links are made, and whether people can drive to the station, leave their cars and use the train. However, it is right that those issues are determined locally, rather than in Whitehall. I am sure that he will want to take up the issues that he raised with his local authority and Network Rail.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (South-West Norfolk) (Con): The Secretary of State referred to the non-closure of rural lines. Will she give a guarantee of investment in places such as Norfolk, where efficient rural rail links are an absolute necessity?

Ruth Kelly: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. There will be no rural line closures in the next seven years. Beyond that, of course, there needs to be flexibility in place, so that we can make sure that rural lines can respond to passenger demand. We are also providing new rolling stock to increase capacity on rural lines, where that is needed.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I add my welcome for my right hon. Friend's announcement of a £600 million investment to tackle bottlenecks at Birmingham New Street and Reading stations, but may I press her a little more on the Birmingham New Street aspect of the announcement? Will she confirm that the investment is only the first tranche of money, and that it is simply the rail component of a much bigger project that needs to be funded if, at New Street, we are to achieve the benefits that are so vital for Birmingham and the west midlands? How will the project be taken forward, and what will the responsibilities be of different Departments and Government agencies in taking it forward?

Ruth Kelly: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in championing the cause of Birmingham New Street. I know that he and his colleagues have made their case strongly with the Department and others involved in the process. I can confirm that £128 million will be delivered by the Department for Transport for the railway improvements at Birmingham New Street, which are desperately needed. I also know that Birmingham city council has put forward plans for a much more ambitious scheme that would secure regeneration benefits for the area as well. The £128 million that we are pledging today is without prejudice to that larger scheme going ahead. In a way, the message for my hon. Friend's constituency is that the first hurdle is cleared. We will assess any future scheme on its merits if a value-for-money case can be made.

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) (LD): Can the Minister confirm whether any money for the 154 railway stations is to go to Devon stations, or whether the reference to Dartmouth is a just a misleading

[Richard Younger-Ross]

mistake? Will there be an increase in capacity between Exeter and Waterloo? That will be vital, particularly during the construction phase of Crossrail.

Ruth Kelly: There will be an increase in capacity at Waterloo station, which I think will serve Exeter too. Some £150 million has been set aside for middle-sized stations. Clearly, there will be a process of iteration with Network Rail and other interested parties about where that money is best targeted. Those are decisions rightly taken by the industry, rather than set from Whitehall. I hear the case that the hon. Gentleman has made, and I will happily forward it to those concerned.

Flooding

4.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a brief further statement to update the House on the serious flooding that is affecting central and southern England. I apologise to those on the Opposition Front Benches for the short time that they have had the statement in advance, but as I am sure Members will appreciate, the situation is changing rather fast.

Cobra met yesterday evening and again first thing this morning. The most serious issue that we have been facing is the potential flooding of the Walham switching station, which would result in power cuts to hundreds of thousands of people and the potential further loss of pumped water supplies. I am pleased to tell the House that this has so far been avoided, thanks to the heroic efforts of the Environment Agency, armed forces, fire service and others who built the temporary defence around the site on Sunday and who have been working to pump water out since.

Although the Environment Agency advises that the River Severn has now peaked, the weather outlook remains unsettled. This includes the possibility of further heavy rain in the flood-affected areas in the days ahead. Those on the site will continue to do all that can be done to protect Walham, and we have been making contingency arrangements for continuity of essential services and supplies, should the need arise.

I am also able to report that the Castlemeads electricity substation has now been brought back into operation, so restoring power to more than 48,000 properties in Gloucestershire. There remain 223 properties in Tewkesbury without power, and it is hoped to have them reconnected later this afternoon. There are also 134 properties in Gloucester and three in Cheltenham which are without power, I am advised.

However, this emergency is still not over and the River Thames continues to cause concern. There was further flooding in Abingdon last night, but no additional significant flooding in the rest of Oxfordshire is now expected. There will, however, be peak flows during the next 24 to 36 hours further down the river, and flooding in Henley, Reading and other riverside properties to Marlow and Windsor may be unavoidable. The Environment Agency is continuing to make efforts to reduce potential flood damage and an evacuation centre is being prepared in Reading. The Jubilee river has protected several hundred properties in Maidenhead.

A total of 140,000 properties remain without mains water following the flooding of the Mythe water treatment works at Tewkesbury. Distribution of water is now the priority. Since yesterday, Severn Trent has deployed about 500 bowsers, and the company says that that will rise to 900 by tomorrow morning. Eighty tankers are available to keep those bowsers and static tanks topped up, and a further 20 tankers are being organised under mutual aid agreements. Three million litres of bottled water a day are being made available, and the Army is helping with distribution. Priority is being given to hospitals and vulnerable groups. Advice is being issued to householders on how to cope with the

loss of mains water supply. Severn Trent does not expect full water supply to be restored for some days. However, it hopes to gain access to the Mythe works today to assess the situation and to make a start on putting a flood barrier around the works to enable water to be pumped out. That should allow work to start on restoring the plant as soon as possible.

I am only too aware, as are all Members of the House, of the very considerable human distress that many people are experiencing, with homes and businesses ruined. I want to pay tribute to the extraordinary community effort as people are helping their neighbours. The Minister for Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (John Healey), visited Gloucester and Tewkesbury today, and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw) was in Reading this morning.

I informed the House yesterday that the revised Bellwin rules will assist local authorities in the areas affected to cover the costs of dealing with the flooding and its immediate aftermath. I can today tell the House that the Government will supplement the existing £14 million flood recovery grant fund with up to a further £10 million, which will be made available to affected local authorities on the same basis.

Finally, I will be holding a briefing meeting for Members of Parliament of constituencies affected in the Moses Room at 5.30 pm today. Officials from the Environment Agency, civil contingencies unit and other departments will be there to provide further details of what is being done, to answer questions, and to pick up particular issues that I know Members will wish to raise. I hope that this will be helpful.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and welcome the increase in the flood recovery grant fund—although in the greater scheme of things, it does not look like it will go very far.

The whole House will be very relieved to hear about the better situation at Walham, and I know that the Secretary of State will wish to keep us informed as matters progress on that front. I thank him for the way in which he has not only kept the House informed of events so far but gone out of his way to keep in touch with hon. Members whose constituencies have been badly affected by these events.

Once again, our first thoughts are with the thousands of people whose lives remain on hold as a result of these terrible floods, and with the emergency services and local authorities who are continuing the struggle to contain the problem and to mitigate its impact on local communities. I am pleased to report to the Secretary of State that experience and feedback from our own Conservative-controlled local authorities is that the relationship with the Government and their agencies on the ground, in dealing with the immediate crisis, is working pretty well. I also pay tribute to the local media in the affected areas, particularly local radio stations, which have become a vital source of information and advice.

As the Secretary of State said, the immediate crisis is by no means over, as the surge in the Thames heads eastwards into Berkshire, threatening further destruction, and many thousands of people in Gloucestershire remain without access to fresh mains drinking water. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) advises me that there have been problems with the delivery of bowsers to people without mains water. Is the Secretary of State satisfied that that situation is now properly managed? My hon. Friend also tells me that food supplies in the town are running low, as it remains cut off from the surrounding road and rail network. Are there emergency plans in place to deal with food shortages if they start occurring?

It is becoming increasingly clear, I am afraid, that last year's £14 million cut to the Environment Agency's maintenance budget, together with a general failure to maintain watercourses, may have played a part in increasing the risk of flooding in the latest floods and in the floods in the north last month. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that that issue will be addressed by the independent inquiry? These events have posed serious questions about the vulnerability of our public infrastructure. Will he ensure that the inquiry also looks at the siting and resilience of key water and electricity installations? One lesson is already clear: it is folly to build water and power plants in places where they can be taken out by floods.

The devastating impact on farmland, and the knock-on consequences for food prices, is becoming clear. I strongly endorse the suggestion made yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Bill Wiggin) that the floods make it all the more essential to speed up payments from the Rural Payments Agency. Given the increased risk of extreme weather events, it is essential that our systems and structures are fit for purpose to meet the challenge. Will the Secretary of State ensure that in the next review of water prices, Ofwat takes proper account of the need for water companies to upgrade the physical capacity of their networks? Of course nobody wants to pay higher bills, but recent events have dramatically illustrated the huge costs to the wider community of underfunding investment in water infrastructure.

On costs, has the Secretary of State applied yet to the European Union solidarity fund for assistance? Will he undertake an urgent assessment of the likely total cost to public funds of repairing or replacing damaged infrastructure, such as bridges, roads, and railway assets, and buildings, such as schools and hospitals? Will he also resolve the uncertainty as to how that work is going to be paid for? Will he clarify the maximum amount that an individual council can apply for under the Bellwin scheme?

As I said yesterday, we welcome the announcement of an independent lessons-learned review, rather than the originally planned review that was to be conducted by the Cabinet Office. However, is the Secretary of State aware that a review of exactly the same name was carried out after the floods in 2000, and that it reported in March 2001? In the light of today's crisis, is it not fair to ask whether lessons from that review were actually learned? In fact, will the Secretary of State make an early statement on how many of the various recommendations from previous lessons-learned inquiries have been implemented? So far, we have identified at least 25 different reports published since 2000 by public authorities, Departments and Select

[Mr. Peter Ainsworth]

Committees, all of which have made recommendations and issued warnings about our country's readiness for extreme floods.

Once the floods are finally over, and the media interest has moved on, local communities will be left with the lonely and miserable task of clearing up, and people will be left trying to piece together a semblance of normal life. It is likely that many will effectively remain homeless for months. Will the Secretary of State consider supporting an initiative to put those who are now in emergency accommodation in touch with others who are generously offering to house them? Above all, local councils and people with flooded homes are worried that, with the holiday season approaching, they will be left to cope with the aftermath on their own and with inadequate resources. What measures is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that there is no let-up in support for the flood-stricken areas in the coming months?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome of the additional funding, which is of course in addition to finance that will be made available under the Bellwin scheme. There is no maximum to the Bellwin scheme; once a local authority goes above the threshold, 100 per cent. of the costs of dealing with the immediate aftermath is made available for up to six months. I am also pleased to hear from him that in his experience, and that of other hon. and right hon. Members, the emergency co-ordination arrangements have worked pretty well on the ground. That reflects my experience, as I told the House yesterday, and it demonstrates the degree of planning that has gone into ensuring that those services work effectively when such events occur.

On the question of water bowsers, I spoke to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) about water distribution—last night, I think; a lot has been happening. We are keeping a close eye on the issue because I know from talking to the Gold Commander late yesterday evening that everyone on the ground is anxious that the promised number of bowsers materialise in the right places. That is the responsibility of the Severn Trent water company. We are continuing to follow that up, which is why the armed forces are helping with the distribution of water. I have already raised the question of food supplies in relation to Tewkesbury because I got a message earlier today from the hon. Gentleman, and we will have an opportunity shortly to follow that matter up with those responsible for the operations, in the briefing to which I have already alluded.

The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) is absolutely right on the matter of public infrastructure, and we discussed that yesterday. Of course, one of the lessons is to look at appropriate siting and protection of infrastructure—for obvious reasons. Water treatment plants, such as Mythe, which was already lifted above the side of the river, have to be located next to rivers because that is where they draw their water from. It is evident that big bits of infrastructure and, in some cases, small pumps, might be taken out, but cannot therefore do their job. Those lessons need to be learned.

On farming and the impact of the flooding on many farmers, we are in contact with the National Farmers Union. *I take the hon. Gentleman's point, which the* hon. Member for Leominster (Bill Wiggin) made yesterday about the Rural Payments Agency. We are keen to try to speed up the way in which the RPA works, but, as I said yesterday, the most important thing for me is to keep the promises that we have made and look to improve performance in the light of what has happened.

We need to consider longer-term costs. To apply to the EU solidarity fund, an assessment has to be made of the total costs of dealing with the emergency. They are not all evident yet.

On infrastructure, it will not yet be possible to know whether some bridges have been so badly damaged that they need extensive repairs or replacement. As I said yesterday, those decisions will have to be made in consultation with the relevant Department.

The hon. Member for East Surrey is right that there have been several reports and recommendations. Let me say a word about "Making space for water". We set up that programme in 2004 precisely because the Government realised that the complex co-ordination of the response to surface-water flooding and river flooding was a problem. The Government response was made in 2005. The coastal overview has already been announced and is going ahead. We aim to have policy decisions on the inland overview in place by 2009, but we wrote to all the stakeholders—the Environment Agency, water companies, local authorities, drainage boards, flood forums, the Association of British Insurers; all the bodies that have an interest in dealing with flooding and surface-water drainage—to say that we were considering giving the Environment Agency a strategic overview and asking for their views. Fifteen urban drainage pilots are already starting and the next step is to consider risk mapping. As I said yesterday, the interim results of the review will help inform that.

On the hon. Gentleman's last point about housing, I am sure that local councils have heard his comments—and what is doubtless being said in local areas—about people's willingness to provide accommodation to those who have been displaced. I will ensure that that is raised.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I apologise for having to leave slightly early today.

I thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for their tremendous efforts and for personally telephoning me to keep me in touch and hear my concerns. I also pay tribute to the people who saved Walham power station, which was crucial.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) mentioned the problems with bowsers. We do not have enough and I should like to mention the areas that are deprived of water. They are: Deerhurst, Apperley, Sandhurst, Hucclecote, Twyning, Dumbleton, Southam, Toddington, Oxenton, Great Witcombe, Brockworth and Snowshill—and, indeed, Northway, despite what the website says. That is a long list of villages in my area that do not have enough water. I am informed that there are large tankers at Ashchurch barracks, which could be used if a direction were given to the Army at the barracks. I understand that it is waiting for a decision. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State looked into that urgently.

I also hear reports that two premature babies were airlifted out of the area but died on the way to hospital as a result of the floods. I understand that another person is missing. Those are the tragic circumstances that we face in Tewkesbury. I therefore ask the Secretary of State to consider whether the recess could be delayed. I know that that will not be popular, but, given the circumstances, I ask the Prime Minister to consider whether a delay to the recess would be in order, or at the very least, the same access to Ministers as they have been good enough to make available so far.

Hilary Benn: On the bowsers, I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman can attend the briefing at 5.30 pm. If he cannot, will he please give me a list of all the locations so that I can take it with me to the meeting and relay it so that action can be taken?

Secondly, the whole House will very much regret what happened on Saturday morning when a pregnant woman in Tewkesbury requested medical assistance. When it became clear that the paramedics would not be able to reach her because of the floods, RAF search and rescue was called and a helicopter carrying an experienced paramedic was immediately diverted to the scene. The mother and the unborn babies were taken to Cheltenham general hospital, but sadly the babies did not survive.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point, I give him an absolute guarantee that Ministers will remain accessible even though the House has risen. I hope that the contact and the relationship that has been established—it is a practical relationship, to try to deal with the practical circumstances that all hon. Members representing constituencies affected are trying to deal with—will continue whether the House is sitting or not.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): Those of us on the Liberal Democrat Benches would like to join others both in expressing sympathy for those affected and in praising the emergency services. The staff who saved the operation of the Walham switching station are due for particular congratulation. It is also good news that an assessment of the Mythe works is under way. I understand the difficulties in doing this, but will the Secretary of State give an indication of the likely timescale for bringing Mythe back into operation, however tentative that assessment might be? Coming hot foot from his constituency, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) has just informed me that flooding seems to have started in Oxford. I wonder whether the Secretary of State was aware of that and whether he can say anything about the potential in that area, because he was clearly not anticipating any significant extra flood damage further down in Oxfordshire.

What arrangements will the Government now make to protect critical infrastructure, such as the national grid switching stations and water treatment plants in other areas, should we unfortunately face similarly enormous inundations over the rest of the summer? How many sites throughout the country are at risk of facing the same sort of problems as those that the Walham switching station and Mythe water treatment works have faced? Can he make a tentative first assessment? How many pumping stations are at risk of encountering the same kind of flooding and inoperability that might have occurred during recent events, and which certainly did occur in Hull? As the emergency enters its fifth day, can he assure us that the emergency services are receiving proper back-up from outside the counties affected, so that their no doubt exhausted staff can be given proper breaks and time for recuperation?

Yesterday the Secretary of State said in reply to me:

"On the strategic overview…the sensible course of action is to reflect on that in light of the review that will be undertaken".—[*Official Report*, 23 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 569.]

Do I understand from his answer to the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) that preparations and the continuation of that policy will in fact continue, as he seemed to imply today? After all, the delays seem unjustified, given the 2004 consultation exercise to which the Secretary of State referred, "Making space for water". Is the Secretary of State aware that the Government of which he was a part at that time stated that the

"Extension of EA strategic role to other forms of flooding and coastal erosion—legislative and organisational considerations"

would be complete by the end of 2006? That was in the timeline of the Government's response, in their March 2005 statement. DEFRA's report of March 2006 states:

"The existing legislation that governs urban drainage has resulted (unintentionally) in an over complex system with diverse responsible bodies".

Does he accept that the policy came about because of that and because

"responsibilities are unclear and at times conflicting"?

What happened to the Government's efforts to deal with the problem? Why did they fail to deliver? Was it because of the wholesale change in ministerial staff, which has meant that there has been no follow-through? Does the Secretary of State accept that moving every Minister—or, indeed, sacking Ministers—is no way to run a Department, as there is then no political or institutional memory from March 2005? What is the point of participation in a consultation exercise or a review if it leads to precisely nothing? What arrangements has the Secretary of State now put in place to ensure that when his Department says that it is going to do something, it actually does it?

Yesterday, the Secretary of State repeated his mantra that there had been no cut in the capital budget. However, there was a cut in the overall flood defence budget. Will he confirm that those cuts—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman could now bring his remarks to a conclusion. We really are in difficult circumstances with time today.

Chris Huhne: Will the Secretary of State confirm that those cuts worsened the situation found by the National Audit Office when it reported that the Environment Agency had failed to meet its target of maintaining 63 per cent. of England's flood defences in target condition?

Hilary Benn: On Mythe, Severn Trent Water says that a full restoration of services could take between seven and 14 days. It is difficult to say for sure, because

[Hilary Benn]

that will depend on what it finds when the water is pumped out and it discovers how much damage has been done to the equipment. There has indeed been flooding in Oxford. As I said earlier, we are not anticipating further extensive flooding, but that really depends on exactly how the flow of water comes down the system.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that an assessment of other critical infrastructure—down the course of the Thames, in particular—has been carried out, because Cobra asked about that. We have been advised that there is nothing that needs to be worried about, given the pulse of water that we have currently. There is a longer-term issue about infrastructure in general, to which I have already alluded. With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, however, it is not possible for me to answer his related question on whether I could identify any other infrastructure that might be at risk from further flooding and extreme weather in the next few weeks and months. If he will kindly tell me where it is going to rain, I might be able to answer the question. I can confirm that the emergency services are receiving mutual aid from other services, which has allowed staff who are very tired—the hon. Gentleman was right about that—to have a rest.

On the "Making space for water" strategy, I emphatically reject the charge that we have let it lie. I have already said—and I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not appear to be listening—that we have already made arrangements to put the coastal overview in place. We have been dealing with this since 2004, and we recognise that it is a problem. Building on what I said yesterday, I said today that we were getting on with it—the consultation has taken place—and that we will also draw on the lessons to be learned from the review that is now being undertaken.

If the hon. Gentleman is able to draw to my attention any flooding that has taken place because the flood defences failed at the level that they were meant to protect, I will undertake to go away and look into that. However, many of the flood defences were overtopped. The National Audit Office acknowledged the progress that the Environment Agency had made in trying to improve the maintenance of flood defences, and that is something that the agency will continue to work on.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. While recognising Members' concerns about what is happening in their constituencies, may I please ask them to limit themselves to one supplementary question? I hope that that will enable us to accommodate a greater number of contributions.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend and all his ministerial colleagues for this statement and for treating this matter so seriously. I also pay tribute to all those who have performed so well in such trying circumstances over recent days. Will he consider the request from Gloucestershire county council for funding up front to meet the huge costs that are already being incurred? Will he also urgently look into the situation at Severn Trent? There is certainly misinformation about who is to have their mains water supply turned off, which is causing problems. It is also completely unacceptable to say that it will take up to 14 days to get people back on to mains water when there are other water suppliers in the area. Wessex Water and Bristol Water supply customers in my constituency, and I am sure that in this day and age it is possible, in an emergency, to tap into that water supply and get households, farms and businesses back on to some form of mains supply. It is catastrophic that people should be without water for 14 days.

Hilary Benn: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who will be allocating the funding announced today according to need, will seek to do so as quickly as possible. Secondly, if there is any confusion about who has lost water supply, I will take the matter further if my hon. Friend provides the details. Thirdly, I share my hon. Friend's concern that Mythe should be brought back on line as quickly as possible—a point that I have already made to the Severn Trent company. I have also already said to the chief executive that if he needs any further assistance to make that happen, we will give it.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): My constituency is located further downstream and, unusually, the peak flows are expected in 48 to 72 hours in areas such as Datchet, Horton, Wraysbury and Old Windsor. The Jubilee river has protected Maidenhead, but channelled the water further down. Given that the Environment Agency has said that it needs £1 billion to deal with flood defences in the UK, and that it does not quite have that budget, I seek the Secretary of State's assurance that he will re-examine the vital lower Thames protection scheme.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Environment Agency has a process through which the priority of schemes is determined, and that the formula is currently under review. The Jubilee river has done its work, but I acknowledge that it protects one part of the area rather than elsewhere. That shows how interrelated the movement of water is and that protecting one area can have a knock-on consequence further down the line. On the question of funding, the £1 billion a year was a sum that resulted from a foresight study looking ahead over the rest of the century. If my memory serves me correctly, I think that the case was that we should be working towards the £1 billion a year by 2024. The House will be aware that we will already have got to £800 million by 2010-11—13 years earlier.

Mr. Elliot Morley (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for keeping the House so well informed, and also for the money made available to north Lincolnshire, which has been used very wisely by North Lincolnshire council to help flood victims. Does he agree that it is not the case that reports are not being acted on? Going back to 1998, the Bye report led to improved contingency arrangements, and "Making space for water" brought about changes in planning and institutional change, and strengthened the role of the Environment Agency. There have been huge improvements over those years.

Although the Government are involved through the public sector, it is important to recognise that there are private sector players, particularly in respect of infrastructure. I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about the inquiry and the need to look further into co-ordination and adaptation of the central infrastructure in flood risk areas.

Hilary Benn: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that contribution, particularly as over recent years he played such an important part in helping to implement the steps that he has mentioned. It is precisely because of the complex interrelationship, including with the private sector, that we are taking this work forward. Everyone has to play their part in dealing with the problem.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): May I echo the comments about the importance of local media, particularly BBC Radio Oxford? Given that I spent Sunday afternoon filling sandbags in East Challow for use in Abingdon, will the Secretary of State look urgently into ensuring that sand and sandbags are in place in the towns most likely to be flooded in future?

Hilary Benn: I happily give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has already encountered that issue on his visits to affected areas, and we will certainly look further into it. It is one important lesson that can be learned. I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about local radio, which is often the best-informed source of advice and information about what is going on and what people should do.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): In Nottinghamshire, much of the flooding was caused by localised torrential rainfall, which simply overran the surface water systems. The Secretary of State has already pointed out the diffuse responsibilities involved. May I press him to take early decisions about a lead agency and, in the review, to take account of new solutions such as sustainable urban drainage systems—SUDS—and the factors that hinder their implementation?

Hilary Benn: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend assurances on both those points. Clearly, it is important that we should make progress as quickly as possible and that we should look at how, practically, those responsible are going to improve surface water drainage, given the experience that we have had.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State, whose conduct has been exemplary and who talked movingly about the human tragedy, discuss with the Chancellor the possibility of the Government launching a fund by putting £10 million down to help private individuals? Others could then add to that. It might be a good idea if those in the House had the opportunity to contribute.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about what further assistance can be given to individuals. As the House may be aware, the Red Cross has issued an appeal today, which covers all the victims of the flooding—victims both of the recent events and of what happened in Yorkshire and Humberside and elsewhere. I am sure that the public will want to contribute generously to that. There is also the funding that the Government have made available previously, what I have announced today, and the funding available under the Bellwin rules.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): Although I appreciate that my right hon. Friend's immediate thoughts are with the crisis in the south and in the midlands, does he accept that in the longer term he and his colleagues should look into trying to stop potential lasting damage to local economies? A welcome help fund for small businesses has been set up by Yorkshire Forward, but the chief executive of the chamber of commerce has already said that it has identified quite a lot of small firms that, although insured, are often not insured to replace damaged equipment with brand-new equipment, and are certainly not insured for loss of business. There is a risk to hundreds or even thousands of jobs in the Sheffield area. That could also damage the complicated supply chain in the engineering industry. I wonder whether the Government could eventually give some thought and attention to what they can do to help.

Hilary Benn: I know that my hon. Friend is meeting the Minister for Local Government to discuss that very issue tomorrow. He draws attention to one of the consequences of the flooding that has hit Sheffield particularly badly, including its industrial base. We will try to draw on those lessons and to talk to the insurance industry about the points that he has raised.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): When I left Oxford at 3 o'clock, the water was rising on the Botley road, in the Osney island area, and on roads off the Botley road, which the Minister for the Environment visited on Sunday; we were grateful for that visit. I hope that the Secretary of State is right, and that there will not be additional significant flooding. It is not clear how many properties will be affected. However, those properties have been flooded in 2000, 2003 and again this year. There are no longer floods every 40 years or every 20 years; instead there have been three floods in seven years. Can he see his way to giving an assurance that the Environment Agency budget will be front-loaded over the period that he envisages to give urgent protection to frequently flooded areas, because they will need it?

Hilary Benn: As I said to the House yesterday, I will be looking at how we phase the increase to the £800 million as part of the comprehensive spending review announcement. I do not know, in the case of the particular properties to which the hon. Gentleman refers, whether the Environment Agency has yet done any work on what a scheme may look like. I undertake to make inquiries about that, as he has raised it with me.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): Can the Secretary of State answer the question that I put to him yesterday? The number of members of the armed forces has been cut because of the policies of the Prime Minister in a previous life, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Barracks that could be used as operation-mounting bases to assist the civil authorities have been sold off. Can the

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

Secretary of State tell me how many troops are available to Cobra to deploy to assist in emergencies such as this? Have any been taken off leave? Have any been taken off training for Iraq and Afghanistan, which are very dangerous places, for which they need training?

Hilary Benn: As I indicated to the hon. Gentleman yesterday, I will answer his question—but I hope that he will recognise and understand that, with respect, the most important priority in the last 24 hours has not been to provide people with the details of precisely where the troops came from. The most important priority has been to ensure that the resources are available both for the extraordinary operation at Walham and elsewhere. As I indicated yesterday, on a number of occasions, I have asked those responsible for responding to the emergency whether they have the resources that they need. I have been assured that that is the case. I hope that, given the hon. Gentleman's interest in the armed forces, which is long lasting and deeply felt, he will join me in praising the extraordinary efforts of the armed forces and all the other people who have been working so hard in this emergency.

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): I have today been informed that Environment Agency staff are being moved from vital duties elsewhere to guard the flood defences at Bewdley from theft. Will the Secretary of State consider introducing swingeing penalties for such attempted theft, and penalties for scrap dealers who are tempted to trade in those highly recognisable metal objects?

Hilary Benn: I am very concerned to hear that in the current circumstances some individuals might think that it is sensible to try to steal flood defences in place for the protection of the public. I undertake to raise that in the meeting at half past 5—and if the hon. Gentleman is able to join us, he can raise it himself.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): When these events are over, will it not be time to look again at creating an upstream water grid to take water across watersheds? That would be useful both in times of drought, to secure water supplies, and in times of heavy rainfall, to relieve floods downstream.

Hilary Benn: I understand that that has been looked into in the past. There are some obvious practical difficulties, including the considerable cost of shifting water from parts of the country where there is an excess of it—at present, that would be large parts of the country, but I am thinking in particular of the north and the Kielder dam—to areas which experience greater water stress. The immediate priority is to ensure that the resilience of the existing pumping supply system can be safeguarded in the face of events such as those we currently face.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): My parliamentary neighbours in Gloucestershire have raised several points, but many hundreds of homes in my constituency have been flooded, spread over a wide area, which poses problems in itself. May I first pay tribute to the emergency services, who worked tirelessly throughout Friday night? I also wish to say that there has been great community spirit in Gloucestershire: everyone I met yesterday was cheerful, and helpful to their neighbours.

I have three requests. First, will the Secretary of State confirm that when the Bellwin scheme arrangements kick in, Gloucestershire will qualify without limit for all the qualifying items? Secondly, will he make money available up front to Gloucestershire county council, as it has already incurred huge costs? Thirdly, will he assure us that the Environment Agency will have sufficient funds to carry out its maintenance responsibilities for watercourses better? Some flooding has been caused by poor maintenance of watercourses, and the EA says it does not have enough money to improve maintenance.

The issue of investment by water companies has not been raised. Before the recent flooding, they told me that their capital investment was rationed because the Government had set a formula specifying how much of their profits they could invest. Will the Secretary of State look again at that?

Hilary Benn: On the last point, what we tell the companies is how much they must invest—and if they wish to invest more, that is up to them. On the Bellwin rules, funding is available for purposes that are clearly set out under long-established arrangements, and payments are made as and when claims are brought forward. On the Environment Agency and the maintenance of flood defences, over the past decade we have increased the money available for that from £300 million to £600 million, and over the next few years we will further increase it to £800 million. The agency has responsibility for that and expertise in it, so it is right that it should take decisions on how much to allocate to particular projects, and on ensuring that the flood defences that are in place are adequately maintained.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman's characteristically detailed and courteous statement will be of great interest to my constituents, 55 of whom were evacuated from their homes to the Radcliffe centre in Church street, Buckingham in the early hours of Saturday morning.

As many Members have testified, there was a serious incidence of flooding as long ago as 1998. It impacted significantly on my constituency, and it caused the Environment Agency to commission a survey from W.S. Atkins that produced many recommendations. I ask the right hon. Gentleman—in a genuine spirit of inquiry, as I did not hear him give an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth)—how many of those recommendations have been fully implemented nine years later.

Hilary Benn: I have not yet read that report, but as the hon. Gentleman has raised it I undertake to go away and have a look at it, and do my best to answer the question. I thank him for what he said about the efforts that have been made to help his constituents who have been affected.

Point of Order

5.15 pm

Derek Conway (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is right that the House has had statements today, yesterday and many days before that from Secretaries of State. Many written ministerial statements have also been made, and one wonders whether there is some kind of league table in operation. We know that the Prime Minister is keen on quoting league tables at us. I wish to draw your attention to the statement in the *Official Report* for Monday 23 July at column 46WS, in which the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor says that he will make a statement on the matter on which he is making a statement. We are a little concerned about whether such statements on potential statements are helping the Prime Minister to develop a league table on informing the House that is not entirely accurate. I hope that you and Mr. Speaker will reflect on that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point of order. As I have said before, the occupant of the Chair has many responsibilities, but when it comes to Ministers making statements, that is entirely their responsibility.

Criminal Damage (Graffiti)

5.16 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend, East) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for offences relating to graffiti; and for connected purposes.

The Bill has two parts. It is aimed at bringing the perpetrators of the criminal act of graffiti to justice, in terms of restorative justice, by getting them first to clear up the graffiti and secondly to meet their victims. That could have a massive impact on our towns, communities, villages and roads.

Mayor Giuliani in New York identified broken windows as an early indicator of the decline of society at street level. There is a similar decline in society at street level caused by graffiti. The Bill seeks to address that problem. It has cross-party support, and I especially thank the hon. Members for Wigan (Mr. Turner) and for Birmingham, Yardley (John Hemming), who have been involved in drafting some of the detail. The Bill also has support from several national groups, including ENCAMS, which is known for the Keep Britain Tidy campaign. It also has the support of the British Transport police and the Restorative Justice Consortium.

Graffiti has a precise definition, and it is criminal damage under the Criminal Damage Act 1971. Unfortunately, it is classified as "other criminal damage", so it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the problem. However, it is estimated that more than 50 per cent. of that category is graffiti. Other estimates suggest that only 30 per cent. to 40 per cent. of graffiti is reported.

The Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 defines graffiti well as

"painting, writing, soiling, marking or other defacing by whatever means".

Hon. Members will know that the principal problem is not so-called graffiti art, but tagging, and it is on that issue that I shall concentrate—although graffiti art, whether one calls it art or not, if done on a private wall without the permission of the owner, is still criminal damage, under the 1971 Act.

There is a massive social and financial cost to graffiti, and I shall deal first with the social cost. It is not only an eyesore but a permanent reminder of the decline in society. Paradoxically, those who are most affected are those who are least likely to be the victims of crime—the elderly and the vulnerable. It is as if there are two parallel universes—one of the perpetrators of such crimes, who are mostly young males, and the other of the older members of our community, who are so intimidated by those crimes.

In 2001 the English house condition survey, produced by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, estimated that 500,000 households or dwellings had graffiti daubed on their walls. Poorer neighbourhoods were the worst affected, with a fifth of residents citing problems with graffiti—twice as many as elsewhere.

The financial costs of graffiti are difficult to pin down exactly, because so many people are affected—companies, local authorities, the British Transport

[James Duddridge]

police, train operating companies, Transport for London, utility companies, voluntary organisations and, particularly important, people's homes. In Southend the local authority spends more than £120,000 a year clearing up graffiti, but that grossly underestimates the costs for local authorities as statutory organisations. The police estimate that at least 10 officers in Southend deal with that criminal activity, at a cost of about £500,000. Furthermore, in terms of broader antisocial behaviour and damage, there are costs of £500,000 for closed circuit television.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley estimates that the costs for Birmingham are more than £1 million. The most stunning figure, which probably under represented the problem and now needs updating in any case, was given in 2000 by a previous Home Secretary, who stated that the cost was in excess of £1 billion. It is probably much more now.

How would the Bill work? At present, youth and adult courts can use restorative justice as part of the sentencing process. I want that to be made mandatory. In addition, we need to catch people earlier. From the youth perspective that would be at the reprimand or warning stage, and for adults it would be at the point of caution, when the offender has already admitted criminal damage. The Bill proposes to make all such cautions conditional on participation in restorative justice. The principal change would be to move from ad hoc action to a strong statutory position to catch everyone.

Restorative justice works. At present it is available to only 1 per cent. of the population, but more than 40 per cent. of victims want to meet the offender. Between 75 and 95 per cent. of victims—depending on which study we read—said that they were satisfied with the restorative justice process.

The perpetrators of those criminal acts need to understand that there are two elements in the damage they do—the physical and the emotional. On the physical element, they need to be involved in clearing up the graffiti. It may not always be possible or appropriate to clear up the site that they have damaged but they should have to clean up somewhere. The Restorative Justice Consortium has excellent examples showing how such schemes work powerfully, and ENCAMS works with the National Offender Management Service and Crime Concern on projects such as Thames21. In some areas, parents are involved in the process. They see their son—it is usually a son rather than a daughter—doing the work, which broadens the family's responsibility.

The most powerful part of the Bill is the second aspect—the emotional element—which involves the offender meeting the victim. Not all victims want to meet the perpetrator close up, even in a facilitated, multi-agency situation, but it is possible for victims of similar crimes to meet that perpetrator. In Southend, Karon Grant, who is charged with the team clearing up graffiti, spends a lot of her time in restorative justice panels explaining the impact of the crime to children, mums and dads and other adults.

I am sure that Members cannot understand why people commit the criminal act of graffiti, but a large number of offenders genuinely do not think that they are doing anything wrong. They do not understand that their actions are against the law, so bringing them face to face with their victims can help them to do so.

The Bill could have some costs. Reparative services and restorative justice panels cost about £500 a person, but the most up-to-date statistics produced by the Ministry of Justice show how powerful such schemes are. The Bill would initially introduce a pilot to prove that the money that we spend on this is saved in other areas, but logically this should make an awful lot of sense, and locally it does seem to be working in Southend.

In addition, Transport for London has a rather innovative scheme, in which it attempts civil recovery from the offender. That has two real advantages: money comes back into the system that can be spent on graffiti prevention, or if the perpetrator of the crime is unable or unwilling to pay the fine, they end up with a county court judgment against them, which provides a further deterrent to other individuals to commit this crime.

In conclusion, this is a billion-pound problem looking for a practical and effective solution. The Bill is part of that solution. It will change the attitudes and behaviour of offenders for the benefit of the offenders and the benefit of society. In the unlikely event that this ten-minute Bill does not go further, I will seek, on a cross-party basis, to amend the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill to the same end.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by James Duddridge, Mr. Neil Turner, John Hemming, Daniel Kawczynski, Ian Lucas, Mr. Roger Gale, Mr. Greg Hands, Mr. Roger Williams, Sammy Wilson, Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, Richard Burden and Lynne Jones.

Criminal Damage (Graffiti)

James Duddridge accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for offences relating to graffiti; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 19 October, and to be printed [Bill 150].

Opposition Day

[18TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Penal System

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I must inform the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

5.28 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House considers that the Government's management of the prison system has become a national disgrace; believes that the Government by ignoring official projections of the prison population and failing to plan for sufficient capacity has allowed jails to become overcrowded, reconviction rates to rise and the Probation Service to become overstretched; further considers that the Government's resort to releasing prisoners early, including violent offenders, without risk assessment or accommodation checks is wholly unacceptable; notes that many of those released under the scheme have previously been refused release on Home Detention Curfew and that others have already re-offended when they should have been in custody; is concerned that offenders are also being transferred early to open prisons from which they can and do abscond at any time and that over 4,000 offenders released early on electronic tags have re-offended, committing over 1,000 violent crimes; further believes that the modest additional prison capacity announced by the Government will be insufficient; and calls upon the Government to halt the End of Custody Licence scheme and take immediate steps to ensure adequate prison capacity, the proper treatment and rehabilitation of offenders, and the safety of the British public.

I am not surprised that the Government appear to have done their level best to minimise debate on this issue today. The first duty of any Government is to protect the public. Let us be clear about what that means. It means that if a Minister issues an instruction to release offenders early from prison, and those offenders go on to commit crimes, the public quite obviously have not been protected and Ministers have failed in their duty.

The early release of prisoners is "simply wrong"—not my words but those of the former Lord Chancellor, just weeks before he announced the scheme. So much for rebuilding trust in politics. Already, 2,000 prisoners have been released early on to the streets, equivalent to two prisons. They have been released without risk assessment and without accommodation checks, even though it is a requirement of the scheme that they have an address to go to. Nearly 1,400 of them have previously been refused release on home custody detention; apparently those offenders were unsuitable for release early with an electronic tag, but it is perfectly acceptable to release them on to the streets with no tag.

A fifth of the offenders released in the first week had committed crimes sufficiently serious that they were jailed for over a year. Three hundred and forty-four of them were violent offenders. The Prime Minister says that they had not committed serious violence, so apparently that makes their release acceptable. People who are jailed for violent assault or causing actual bodily harm are apparently entirely suitable to release from our prisons early. Well, it might be all right by the Government that more than 300 violent offenders have been tipped out of jail, but it is not all right by the public and it is not all right by us.

One hundred and forty-nine of those released had been in prison for burglary; 22 for robbery; more than 400 for theft; and 65 for drug offences. The Government do not even know what 32 of those released were imprisoned for in the first place. The former Prime Minister repeatedly said that the scheme would be temporary; the new Lord Chancellor says that it might be permanent. That is a measure of Ministers' grip on the prison system.

Now we know that at least six of the released prisoners committed crimes, including two offenders who carried out a robbery while on their way to see a probation officer. Their original crime, assaulting a police officer, was not considered serious enough, according to the Prime Minister, to merit an apology. Eighteen early release prisoners still remain unlawfully at large.

Our position is unequivocal: those offenders should never have been released early in the first place, still less with more than £200 in their back pockets. That was their reward for getting out of prison early, and it is why the National Association of Probation Officers says that offenders are queuing up to get on to the scheme.

When he announced the scheme on 19 June, the Minister said that

"release on licence is not the same as Executive release. Releasing people on licence means that their sentence continues."—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2007; Vol. 461, c. 1242.]

Even by this Government's standards, that is remarkable spin. How can an offender's sentence be continuing if he is let out of jail, free to commit other offences? As the Prison Officers Association said,

"The fact that they're not calling it executive release is just word games."

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not understand what release on licence means. It is a long-established concept, whereby for the duration of the sentence imposed by the court, the prisoner is subject to recall to prison if he commits a further offence. The concept is clear, and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not appear to understand it.

Nick Herbert: How does the hon. Gentleman think that the 18 offenders who have not been tracked down will be recalled? As far as the public are concerned, those offenders are not continuing their sentence; they are free, out on the streets and able to commit further offences, which they could not otherwise have committed if they had been behind bars.

We all know why the Government are releasing prisoners earlier: the prisons are full. The reason they are full is that the Government, not least the Lord Chancellor, repeatedly ignored warnings that more capacity would be needed. As long ago as 1992, in his report on the Strangeways riot, Lord Woolf warned that the prison population would double from 44,000 to well above current levels by next year, 2008. In 2000, when the current Lord Chancellor was Home Secretary, his officials predicted that the prison

[Nick Herbert]

population would be at current levels by this year. Two years later, the lowest Home Office projection for the prison population today was 5,000 above the current capacity. The Government were told that greater capacity was needed, and they simply ignored the projections. Their great claim is to have provided another 20,000 prison places. Well, let us examine that claim.

Only three new prisons in the past 10 years were commissioned by the Labour Government; the rest were commissioned by the previous Conservative Administration. In the year when the Government came to power, the number of new prison places was 4,716. By 2005, the number of new places had fallen to 940. During the current Lord Chancellor's watch, prison capacity building fell by 86 per cent. over three years. The Government also tell us that they are providing an additional 9,500 prison places by 2012, but on their own projections, that will not be enough. Total capacity will still be 4,000 places short of their medium projection for the prison population by that time, assuming that prisons will be full to the gunnels, with prisoners continuing to be doubled up. As Harry Fletcher of the National Association of Probation Officers said,

"They've had eight, nine years and really done nothing... There's been no substantial building programme and no provision for probation."

Mr. Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): The hon. Gentleman prayed in aid Lord Woolf, but he should not forget that Lord Woolf also said that

"no solution will be really effective, apart from reducing prison population... building more prisons is not the solution, not least because it means that more and more resources are being sucked into the hugely expensive process of building prisons",

instead of

"making effective non-prison sentences".

Nick Herbert: If we were able to rehabilitate offenders, we could reduce the prison population. We cannot rehabilitate them while prisons are so full, and I shall return to that point later.

The early release scheme can only be, in the words of the Prison Officers Association, a short-term fix. The Government have admitted that 25,000 offenders will be released early in the next year, but they will reduce the prison population by only 1,200.

At the current rate of incarceration, it is likely that prisons will fill up again and we will face a new crisis by the autumn. If the Government demur from that prediction, we would like to hear from them. As the Prison Officers Association has said, building new prisons

"should have been done years ago".

Last summer, in a BBC interview with Andrew Marr, the current Lord Chancellor said:

"I've never had a problem about building more prisons...I was one of the Home Secretaries who greatly increased the capacity of the prison service".

Clearly, that was nonsense, but he went on to say:

"I wish it were possible to deal with criminals outside prison, but most people who end up in prison go there because community punishments have failed. So it isn't a difficulty for me about getting people into prison and keeping them there until they are better reformed."

That was better. But then earlier this month there was an interesting front-page report in *The Times*, which stated:

"The Government will not be able to build its way out of the prison crisis, Jack Straw suggested yesterday. He indicated that the only way the pressure could be relieved was by sending fewer people to jail and using more non-custodial sentences...The Lord Chancellor...called for a 'national conversation' about the use of prison. He also spoke of the need to make community sentences more effective to build confidence and trust in non-custodial sentences."

A year ago the Lord Chancellor said that he wanted to lock people up and that community sentences did not work; now he is saying that he wants to send fewer people to jail, have more community sentences, and have a conversation. So what is his current view? Is he going to be Judge Dredd or Mary Poppins? If he wants to build confidence in community sentencing, he has a very long way to go. Under the home detention curfew scheme that he introduced in 1999, more than 4,000 prisoners who were released early have reoffended, committing more than 7,000 crimes. More than 1,000 of those were violent offences, including one murder, 56 woundings and more than 700 assaults. Earlier this month, "Panorama" revealed serious flaws in the tagging of offenders. The public do not want a conversation with him. They want to feel safe. They want to walk home from work in the knowledge that they will not be mugged by somebody who should have been safely behind bars. They certainly do not want to be told that the answer is to weaken the sentencing of dangerous offenders.

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the other things that the public and the judiciary need to be confident about is that, when sentences are passed by a judge, those sentences will be served? The expectation of the court will be that the sentence will be served as it was passed and the danger of early release schemes is that those sentences are not in fact served. That in its turn will undermine the public's confidence in the judiciary.

Nick Herbert: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. One of the worst effects of the early release scheme is that it undermines public confidence in sentencing, just as the Government undermined it in relation to their changes to determinate sentences, which mean that there is automatic early release after half the sentence is served—a proposal that we opposed.

Ten years ago, the present Lord Chancellor said that indeterminate sentences gave

"justice, above all for the victim, but also for the offender."—[*Official Report*, 19 June 1996; Vol. 279, c. 902.]

Now he wants to review those sentences. Perhaps he should have a word with the Home Secretary about his plans. Only last Thursday, she was berating hon. Members for not supporting the sentences. The former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) is worried. In his column for *The Sun* he said:

"It's no time for a u-turn on crime...what has been happening since the fragmentation of the Home Office...?"

He said that the Home Secretary

"has no control...over the froth that's being talked about indeterminate sentences".

That is the problem with splitting the Home Office, which is no doubt why the current Secretary of State for Justice opposed the idea last year. One Department talks tough and the other lets prisoners out early.

The right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside was right about another thing: the new Prime Minister shares the blame for the current crisis in our prisons. In his diaries, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside describes the 2004 spending review, in which the then Chancellor would agree to fund only two thirds of the additional prison places requested. The then Chancellor removed the Home Office from the current spending review and froze its budget. Clearly, in his judgment law and order was not a priority. That is why we have the catastrophe of overcrowded prisons. Some 17,000 prisoners are doubling up in cells—twice as many as when Labour came to power. More than 1,000 cells designed for two people are occupied by three. That means that nearly a quarter of the entire prison population is housed in cells designed for one fewer person. The price of such overcrowding is that the rehabilitation of offenders is made impossible. As the prison service annual report says:

"Crowding...dilutes the resource available for constructive activity. High throughput and frequent daily movement impact directly on regime delivery by diverting staff resources and making it more difficult to assess prisoners and allocate them to appropriate interventions."

The number of prison officers has risen at only half the rate of the increase in the prison population, and prisoners are being transferred early to open prisons. Last summer, the governor of Ford open prison in my constituency warned that the transfer of prisoners who should really be in category C conditions

"will mean almost inevitably that the abscond rate will go up."

She went on to say:

"Ministers have apparently been briefed to this effect and are taking this risk."

The chief inspector of prisons has warned that high-risk offenders are being transferred to open prisons, some without any proper risk assessment. Murderers are walking out of open prisons at will. In an overstretched probation service, some officers supervise up to 80 offenders and, as a result, reconviction rates have soared. Of the people discharged from prison, 65 per cent. reoffend within two years—up from 59 per cent. in 1998. Among young people, the recidivism rate is even higher. Reoffending accounts for more than half of all crime.

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East) (Lab): I note that the hon. Gentleman has referred to Ford open prison in his constituency, so will he support it being upgraded to category C?

Nick Herbert: The problem is that the prison governor made that proposal behind the backs of people in the local community. Uniquely, they have an agreement with the prison not to house more serious offenders locally. I think that the local community would be willing to have a higher category prison located in the area, but only if the debate is held openly with them. In my view, it was disgraceful of the governor to make that proposal at the same time as she was negotiating renewal of the agreement with the local authority. I think that the right hon. Gentleman should be careful before he asks other hon. Members about matters to do with their constituencies.

The Government's social exclusion unit has estimated the cost of reoffending to the taxpayer at more than £11 billion a year. It is essential that that depressing spiral is broken. Nearly one fifth of prisoners have been convicted of drugs offences, and drugs are rife in prisons. Ninety per cent. of prisoners have a significant mental health problem. Prison suicides have leaped this year, but we will never deal with such problems without adequate prison capacity.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is not a significant part of the problem the fact that there are 8,000 foreign prisoners in British jails? The Government have not done nearly enough to ensure that they are repatriated to their country of origin, so that they can serve their full sentences in secure detention, at the expense of their own taxpayers.

Nick Herbert: I agree with my hon. Friend, and one of the ironies of the current early release scheme is that it does not apply to foreign nationals. One would have thought an obvious way to deal with the overcrowding problem would be to remove foreign national prisoners more swiftly, perhaps before the end of their sentences. That would be preferable to releasing domestic prisoners and putting them out on the streets, where they are able to reoffend.

As I said, 90 per cent. of prisoners have a significant mental health problem, but we will never deal with that without adequate prison capacity. Not only have the Government missed their own pitifully low target to reduce overcrowding, but they appear to be complacent about the situation. The Prime Minister was barely briefed on the matter last week, and the Minister with responsibility for prisons, the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), told "The Westminster Hour" on Sunday that

"in general terms, the Labour Government has got it right now."

What could he have meant by that? What does he think is "right" about the prisons being at bursting point? Last year, the Lord Chancellor said that he was proud of the Government's record on law and order in that respect. Is pride what he feels when he learns that prisoners whom he has released have committed robbery?

In the biography of the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside, an "adviser" famously remarks:

"God alone knows what Jack Straw did for four years..."

He added that the Home Office was "a giant mess." Actually, we know what he did. He talked tough on sentencing, but he failed to build prisons. He promised action on violent crime, but it soared by a third. He said that he would protect the public, but he let prisoners out on tags, and they committed the most serious offences. In spite of my belief in rehabilitation, when it comes to his record, I am afraid that the Lord Chancellor is a serial offender who has no chance of going straight.

[Nick Herbert]

The Lord Chancellor should have begun his new role with an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister to review capacity. He should have looked at the thousands of foreign nationals who remain in our prisons and asked why more are not being deported. He should have asked what happened to the prison ship Weare, which was bought by the Home Office for £3.7 million, and skilfully sold off last year for a rumoured £2 million. Instead, within days of taking office, he released hundreds of violent offenders on to the streets. The Government's management of the prison system has become nothing less than a national disgrace. They are failing prisoners, who cannot be rehabilitated in overcrowded conditions. They are failing the staff, who are being asked to do an almost impossible job. Above all, they are failing the public, whom the Government are putting at risk.

5.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the record of the Government which has since 1997 cut crime, reformed the penal system, invested in record prison places, created a legislative framework which provides tough and effective sentences, introduced risk assessment and offender management systems, introduced and seen ever increasing numbers of offenders complete accredited programmes, enabled record numbers of offenders to pay back to the community through unpaid work, ensured that offenders in the community who pose a risk to the public are recalled to custody, radically reformed the youth justice system and brought the prison and probation services together under the National Offender Management Service with a renewed focus on protecting the public and reducing re-offending."

I welcome this debate, and I am grateful to the Opposition for enabling it, because there is no more important priority for this Government—and, I hope, all Governments—than ensuring the safety of our citizens. I am proud of our achievements in that respect. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) forgot to mention that over the past 10 years, crime has fallen by 35 per cent. There are record numbers of police, and the chances of being a victim of crime are the lowest for 25 years. We have provided 20,000 new prison places and will be building another 9,500. More offences and offenders than ever before—over 1.3 million in 2006—are being brought to justice. More of the most violent and dangerous offenders are being sent to jail for longer.

That record contrasts starkly with that of the Conservatives in their 18 years in government. They failed: in their 18 years in government, crime doubled, police numbers fell, and the number of people convicted plummeted by a third, with only one crime in 50 leading to a conviction. The party's complacency was insulting to the British people, who responded by evicting it from office. Ten years later, the Conservatives' approach is just as incoherent as it was back in 1997. They talked tough, but they failed to support many of the measures that we introduced to cut crime. They opposed tougher sentences for murder, and for sexual and violent offences. They opposed indeterminate sentences for those who commit serious sexual or violence offences. They opposed the new five-year minimum custodial sentences for unauthorised possession of firearms, and at first they dismissed our antisocial behaviour measures as gimmicks. For all their fancy words about more prison places, the Opposition have consistently voted against the taxation and public spending that would allow any new prisons to be built.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: Of course I will give way to the hon. and learned Gentleman; indeed, I will refer to him in a moment, so bring him on.

Mr. Garnier: Will the former Home Secretary tell us precisely where the 20,000 additional places are that he claims have been built? Which prisons are they in? What new buildings are they in? Is it not true that the majority of those new places are simply the result of prisoners doubling up in single cells and trebling up in double cells?

Mr. Straw: I am afraid that I cannot provide the hon. and learned Gentleman with all the information, but some of the places are in new prisons. Some are in additional units in existing prisons, and some are the result of doubling or trebling in prison cells, which is far better—*[Interruption.]* I thought that the Opposition, too, were in favour of making the best use of existing accommodation, which is what we have done. The number of rehabilitation courses that prisoners have been able to take has vastly increased since the Conservative Administration.

Later, we will come on to the details of the pledges made by the hon. and learned Gentleman, who continues to imply what the shadow Home Secretary has made explicit. The shadow Home Secretary has offered to "spend what it takes" to build new prisons. He admits that he has no idea how much that is, but we can give him all the calculations that he needs.

At the same time, the Conservatives have made wild pledges to cut—not to increase—£21 billion of public spending. They disagree with one another about what their policy should be. The shadow Home Secretary is dreaming up uncosted plans for new prisons, while the hon. and learned Gentleman who adorns the Front Bench is saying that prison is not the answer and is calling for a review of sentencing. The hon. and learned Gentleman says that he is on a massive "voyage of discovery", but that voyage is clearly taking place on a mystical vessel crowded out with Conservative Front Benchers, all heading for some fantasy island, with just one problem—they have no captain, no map, no compass and they cannot agree on whether to go forward, back, left or right.

There is, I will concede, one thing on which the Conservatives do agree—they want new prisons, but they do not want them in their own back yard. The hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire), for example, a shadow Home Affairs Minister, says that he wants more prisons, as long as they are not in his parliamentary constituency, Hornchurch, where a plan for a prison in Rainham is, apparently, "wholly inappropriate". We have a little indication that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs is in the same position. Even when there is a proposal to increase the category of his open prison at Ford from D to C—yes,

to relieve some overcrowding, by making it more secure—he says that he is wholly opposed to that as well.

Nick Herbert: Is the right hon. Gentleman satisfied with the management of a prison from which, on average, over the past two years two offenders a week, including murderers, have absconded?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman must know, first, that if the prisons are open prisons, which I assume he supports, there will be some absconds. If his policy is for no open prisons, let him say so. The number of absconds from open prisons has dropped dramatically from more than 1,000 in 1996-97, when there was a Government whom he supported, to nearly half that number, 556, in the last year for which we have figures. Secondly, if his concern is about absconds from an open prison, why on earth is he opposing proposals—*[Interruption.]* He says build a fence, but his proposals are to do exactly that.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): I say straight away to the right hon. Gentleman that over the years I have had a great deal of respect for the way in which he has approached these matters, particularly when he was Home Secretary. The Opposition are not always right, and the Government are not always right. There is much to be said for moving forward in a consensual way sometimes. One of the Government's experiments with night courts at Bow street, for example, was something of a disaster and had to be abandoned. Occasionally, things go wrong.

Mr. Straw: If I may return the compliment without ruining a fine career ahead of him, I have always had great respect for the hon. Gentleman. We have always had sensible and respectful conversations about these matters. It is true of all Administrations that some of their proposals, which they think will work—especially in the area of criminal justice, where they are inevitably dealing with the most unpredictable, chaotic members of the community—will not work. That does not necessarily mean that they should not try them. I personally thought that night and evening courts would work, but that turned out not to be the case. That has worked in other countries, but not here.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs made much of the fact that rates of opening new places had not kept pace with some estimates of likely demand for places. Forecasting in this area, I readily accept, is not an exact science, but before the Opposition start pulling the mote from our eye, they ought to examine the beam in their own. The record of the previous Administration was dire. Shortly before I became Home Secretary, more than 1,000 police cells had been used to cope with overcrowding on a considerable scale throughout the early and mid-1990s.

Yes, I did ask the Prison Service to double and in some cases to treble accommodation because I judged, and so did the Prison Service, that that was a far better way of accommodating the increase in the prison population than by the use of police cells. We have had to use police cells again. I regret that, and I am working very hard to reduce that.

However, it was at the end of the 1980s, 10 years into the then Conservative Administration, that the biggest crisis ever hit the service. It was so bad that the then Home Secretary, now the noble Lord Hurd of Westwell, had to come to the House—I remember sitting on the Opposition Benches and listening to the statement—to announce not that over a period 1,500 to 2,000 places would be saved, but that at a stroke 3,500 places would be saved by extending remission of sentences of less than 12 months from one third to one half of sentence length. The hon. Gentleman says that we have done that, but I remind him that that was supposed to be a temporary measure. It was made permanent in the Criminal Justice Act 1991.

The end of custody licence is necessary to cope with the current prison numbers, and it is proportionate to the problem. It involves the early release of prisoners who are serving less than four years just 18 days—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman. A chorus of sedentary comments across the House is not helping progress in a strictly time-limited debate.

Mr. Straw: Indeed, I blame the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), not the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle).

The end of custody licence involves the early release of prisoners serving less than four years 18 days—just two and a half weeks—before the date when they would have been released in any event. In other words, eligible prisoners due in normal circumstances to come out today, 24 July, would, under the scheme, have been released on 6 July. I understand the point about the reassurance of the public, so it is important to put this into context.

Overall, average determinate sentence lengths for adults discharged from prison have increased by more than two months since 1995, and notwithstanding home detention curfew, the average time spent in prison has also increased from 14.7 months in 1995 to 16.8 months in 2005. That obviously does not take account of the effect of ECL, but ECL cannot have any significant effect on those numbers. The hon. Gentleman is dining out on the fact that prisoners are being released early, which they have been under all systems of sentencing.

Although it now appears that the Opposition are about to change their mind, as I will explain, I would advise them to continue with a system under which, if prisoners earn good behaviour and have to be reintroduced to the community, they are released before their full term. The proportion of the nominal sentence actually served has marginally increased, not decreased, from 46 per cent. to 48 per cent. over the period from 1995 to 2005.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the arrangements for ECL exclude many categories, including those who are serious, violent and dangerous offenders. But because ECL involves such a relatively short period of prior release, it is done by assessment against set criteria and not individual risk assessments of the kind that necessarily apply to HDC and parole, where the prior release times are much longer, and in the case of either,

[Mr. Straw]

the offences may be more serious. As I explained, there are a number of exclusions from ECL, including those who have no release address, or who have previously broken temporary release arrangements or escaped from custody.

The logical consequence of the hon. Gentleman's argument was that no one should ever be released from prison unless we could be certain that they would not commit a further offence. The dismal truth is that quite a large number of prisoners, however long they are kept, are likely to commit a further offence. Would that it were otherwise. One of the reasons I am so keen on working to improve the effectiveness of community sentences and also public understanding, but above all the effectiveness, is so that there is less likelihood of those offenders reoffending, but some will. I strongly advise the hon. Gentleman against going into the next election saying that once someone is admitted to prison, they are never going to be released, or that the Conservatives will abandon any idea of early release for good behaviour, or that no offender will ever commit a further offence.

A luxury of opposition, as Conservative Members so ably demonstrate, is that they do not need to come up with the answers. The job of Government is to come up with answers. Although we understand that an effective penal policy must be based on more than the bricks and mortar of prisons, we have also recognised the need for additional places, which is why in the past 10 years we have provided additional prison places at twice the rate as under the previous Administration. Sorry, but that is a fact. It took the Conservatives 18 years to produce just under 20,000 places. It has taken us 10. In other words, they added an average of 1,000 places a year, whereas we have added an average of 2,000 places a year. *[Interruption.]* There is no dubiety about that—it is the truth.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the previous Home Secretary announced a further building programme to deliver 8,000 new prison places by 2012. On top of that, a further 1,500 places were announced by the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), on 19 June. Work has started on 500 of those extra places, the first of which will come into use in January next year.

I welcome this debate, not least because I hope that, as the hon. Gentleman said, we can agree that it is time to have a sensible national debate about sentencing and the use of prison in England and Wales. Lord Hurd of Westwell sought to tackle that when he was Home Secretary back in 1987. Would that we had heard similar balanced remarks from the hon. Gentleman, who wishes to succeed him in due course. Lord Hurd told this House of

"the need to strike a balance between tough sentences for those who pose a threat to society and lesser sentences for those who pose no such threat. Hence the emphasis which we have placed on tough and challenging alternatives to custody".—[*Official Report*, 16 July 1987; Vol. 119, c. 1296.]

That sentiment was expressed as the Tory Administration were seeking again to address the pressure of prison numbers. They had first sought to do so in 1984 by increasing parole in order to double the overall rate of release. I was reminded of Lord Hurd's wise words when reading the detailed comments of the hon. and learned Member for Harborough, who favours a review of sentencing. He says that there are

"far too many people in prison for them humanely and safely to be kept in prison".

I agree with that, although he has gone on to say that prison does not work, which I question. Yet his bosses take a completely different view. "Build more prisons," they say, without any details of how to pay for them.

Let me come on to some of the key issues that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs must face if he is going to be serious about having a prison policy. He told the *Littlehampton Gazette*—of which, I hope he tells its editor, I have become an assiduous reader—that

"offenders should serve their sentence in full—period."

[Interruption.] He says yes. Fine—if that is the policy of the Conservative party, I invite him to consider its effect. The effect of prisoners serving their sentence—that is, their nominal sentence—in full, period, would be to add 60,000 places to the prison population over a period of at least 10 years, on top of the other projections. If he questions that figure, I am happy to make available independent statisticians in my Department or the Office for National Statistics, or he can go to the Library if he prefers. He has committed himself to 60,000 extra places, and the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) has said something similar:

"It's ridiculous...The first step would be to scrap Tony Blair's parole reforms, which now allow 30,000 criminals a year to be freed on licence before they've even completed half their sentence."

An extra 60,000 prison places would cost £6.6 billion to build and £2.2 billion a year to run.

Mr. Garnier: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Straw: Of course. I hope that the hon. and learned Gentleman will let me know whether the Conservatives' policy is that prisoners

"should serve their sentences in full—period."

Mr. Garnier: Let me return the Secretary of State to what this debate is about—the Government's policy, which is a national disgrace. A moment ago, he quickly elided the concept of ECL and the 18-day early release system. Most ECL prisoners serve relatively short terms, not life sentences, and it is in the last 18 days of a short sentence that most of the resettlement work is done, so that the probation service, social services, the housing people and the jobcentre people can come into prisons and interview those about to be released to ensure that they can then move out into the wider world and pick up where they left off. Is there not an argument, which the former Home Secretary should get his head around, that by releasing these people early, without allowing them the opportunity to be resettled, he is merely building up a reoffending problem that is foreseeable and has been predicted?

Mr. Straw: I do not accept that. We have provided additional resources to the probation service of, I think, £300,000, and we will continue to do so. Of course I regret any reoffending by any prisoner. However, we are talking about releasing people two

and a half weeks early: anybody would think that we were talking about murderers sentenced for a minimum tariff of 20 years being let out after a year. The hon. and learned Gentleman must face the fact that there is always a risk when prisoners are released. We have increased the amount of resources to the probation service by more than 70 per cent. in real terms, above what the previous Conservative Administration provided, because I recognised as Home Secretary, as did my successors, the need to have end-to-end management of sentences. We also extended the period of licence to the end of the sentence, not the three-quarters point. He is absolutely right—we are talking about short-sentence prisoners who would be let out in any event, and always in no more than two and a half weeks' time.

The oddest thing of all is the complaint that we should not give these prisoners any money, which has been part of the criticism levelled at us by the Conservatives. They are not eligible for benefit, but we are told, time and again, that we should release them on to the streets without any money at all—without the £200. That would be facile in the extreme, as well as being inhumane.

Mr. Garnier: That is disingenuous.

Mr. Straw: It certainly is not. I listened with great care to the hon. and learned Gentleman, who faffed around. He did not say whether he was supporting the Leader of Opposition's policy, which is to end parole, or his senior Front-Bench spokesman's policy, which is to ensure that prisoners serve their nominal sentence in full—period.

Nick Herbert: While the Secretary of State is talking about sentencing policy, could he tell me what his proposed review of indeterminate sentencing will mean? Could he assure me that the Home Secretary agrees with him that there is a problem in the operation of indeterminate sentences given that on Thursday she berated the Opposition—wrongly, as a matter of fact—for not supporting them?

Mr. Straw: There are two different matters here—one is the concept of indeterminate sentences, which has much merit, and the other is the practice of indeterminate sentences. All sentence structures must be kept under review. The previous Administration did so when they were being wise. As I said to the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), we are dealing with an area where prisoners' behaviour is unpredictable. We are also dealing with the response to the messages that we send out as regards 30,000 sentences. Although one can predict some of that behaviour, one cannot predict it all.

I cannot tell the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs the results of the review, as it is currently under way. It would be very curious to invite somebody—

Nick Herbert: What is it about?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman wants to know what it is about, I suggest that he examine the terms of reference of the Carter review, which has already been established. I was going to deal with this at the end of my speech, but I will do it now. As part of my Sunday reading, I read *The Sunday Telegraph*, which is usually extremely informative on further splits in the Conservative party and other difficulties that the Conservatives have faced, including in Ealing, Southall and Sedgefield. I do not wish to intrude on private grief, but the public interest requires it. The right hon. Member for Witney—currently in Rwanda—said that he had asked the hon. Gentleman to establish a review of prison policy. I think that it has only just been established, and I am not asking him what the results are. I was astonished that the Leader of the Opposition was saying that they were going to have a review, and thought that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister would follow it. He has only just caught up. We spend millions of pounds on researchers in Conservative central office—we have trebled the amount of money that they receive—but they are still doing poor work. If they had Googled "prisons review", they could have found out that on 10 May my predecessor announced that Lord Carter of Coles was to conduct a review about the balance between the supply of and demand for prison places, which will of course include the practice of indeterminate sentences. Moreover, the Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is shortly to be renamed the Justice Committee, is conducting a review of sentences and other matters, on which I will be giving evidence later this evening.

We have to have a rational, sensible debate about the totality of the prison estate and how we use other methods. I understand that it is very difficult because, on one level, for all of our constituents, the demand is that where a serious offence is committed, so-and-so should be jailed. I understand that—we have all faced it—and I do not apologise for the fact that I presided over an increase of 20,000 prison places, because I thought that it was necessary.

Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman touched upon a very important aspect of the debate, which is the reduction of reoffending rates, and the attempt to smooth the transition back into normal society for those leaving prison. At the moment, reoffending rates for some categories, particularly young offenders serving very short sentences, are as high as 92 per cent. What measures does the Secretary of State think could be taken to reduce that figure, and will he expand on the point about special provision being made to help ex-prisoners get into the workplace, find housing and make a meaningful contribution to society?

Mr. Straw: There is a real problem with young, persistent serious offenders, many of whom have drifted into criminal behaviour at a very early age. They often come from chaotic, dysfunctional families or—even worse from their point of view—are looked-after children, typically in local authority care. There are no easy answers that allow us to break this cycle. Some of those young people have to be locked up for the protection of the public, and sometimes for their own protection, to give them an opportunity to be educated. We have expanded the custodial estate for such prisoners.

One of the reasons my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister established the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and a joint responsibility in respect of the

[Mr. Straw]

Youth Justice Board for the Secretary of State in that Department and myself, which I greatly welcome, was to look more widely at how we divert some of those young people from offending before they get to that point, and how we might support them better if and when they do offend.

I know that time is pressing, so I want to finish by saying this. We must have a sensible debate, and I welcome the contribution that some Opposition Members have made. Conservative Front Benchers have to make up their mind about this matter. We could, if we wanted to, carry on increasing the population, not just to the levels we propose—it will have to be increased—but to the levels to which it has been increased in the United States. The US now has 2 million people in prison. Its incarceration rate is five times that of the UK, and we have one of the highest incarceration rates in Europe. Such an increase would mean not 80,000 prisoners but 400,000, and not 140 prisons, but 700. The public may want that. I do not think that they do—I think that they want to go a different way—and if they do not, all of us have to participate in this debate about the sensible level of risk and the sensible balance between putting people in prison and doing our best to take them out of crime outside prison.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): The Secretary of State has talked a lot about the state of prisons and overcrowding. Does he agree that one easy win might be to remove prison cells from the extraordinary smoking provisions that his Government introduced in the Health Act 2006? Those provisions appeared to be endorsed by his Cabinet colleagues as recently as 26 June, when the then Secretary of State for Health made the incredible assertion that a prison cell is akin to a prisoner's own home.

Mr. Straw: I am sorry, I was briefed about most things, but—

Mr. Jeremy Browne: You can smoke in prisons.

Mr. Straw: Yes, you can.

When I went to Belmarsh recently, two things struck me. Belmarsh is not just a high security prison, but a local prison for that part of south-east London. One of the things that struck me was that far fewer prisoners were addicted to drugs in prison, which is reflected by the numbers. The number of prisoners testing positive for drugs has dropped from about 30 per cent. to about 9 per cent., and the regimes in prison are much better than they ever were. *[Interruption.]* It happens to be true, I say to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough.

The second thing I kept thinking was that something was not in the air. There was an absence, or a great reduction, in tobacco smoke, which usually fills prisons. My view is that prisoners should be able to smoke in prison cells, if they want to—

Mr. Malins: So should MPs. What about us?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman says MPs should too.

I am unapologetic about the fact that alongside the doubling and trebling of prison cells, I also arranged for televisions to be introduced into prison cells, apart from for prisoners on the basic regime—those who had broken prison rules or were just being introduced to prison.

In conclusion, I agree with many of those in the Opposition, but I do not accept the rather rabid approach taken by the new shadow Justice Minister, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs. That is not true of the hon. and learned Gentleman, who is actually far to the left of many of us. He would actually let people out; I am in the middle, between the two of them. I welcome the opportunity to set out our approach to penal policy. It is a challenging area that requires hard choices and difficult decisions. We take our responsibilities seriously. This Government's record of cutting crime, increasing police numbers and increasing prison places shows that we can assure the public that their safety is our paramount concern.

6.16 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue. I agree that there is a need for a national conversation about it, and I hope that it is slightly better informed and more valuable than is sometimes the case. The motion is extremely timely because there is a crisis in our prison system. It is one that has developed not in the past few weeks, but in the past few years. Many of us recall the situation under the previous Conservative Administration. I remember, as a chairman of a police authority, having to find a large number of police cells to help out with long-term prisoners, and those cells were no longer available for their primary purpose. That was a very difficult circumstance.

I tend to agree that the position during the past few weeks with regard to early release, and the system's lack of ability to cope with the risk assessment of some of those released, has been shambolic, and we should say so. The Government have not shown themselves in the best light through their inability to perform their basic duties appropriately.

What I cannot agree with or accept is the simplistic demand for more and more prison capacity. It does not make sense. It is not a logical response to the situation in the country. When I see Conservative Members blithely saying that they would like to double the prison population, and spend an extra £3.4 billion on building prisons—an extra penny on income tax—

Nick Herbert: The extra penny on income tax was your idea.

Mr. Heath: Our plan was a penny on income tax to go towards education, but the hon. Gentleman's party wants a penny on income tax to build more prisons, and support a policy of failure. Is that the right way? It does not seem appropriate to me at all. The Leader of the Opposition seems to be all over the place on the issue, too. Sometimes he wants to hug a hoodie, and other times, he wants—as he told the *Evening Standard*—to convict and lock up more and more criminals. I presume it depends on whether one catches him on a flip or a flop. The former is a flip, and the latter a flop.

The Government have a problem with their attitude, and they know it perfectly well. It was encapsulated by the response from the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson) to justice questions the other day. He recognised the fact that we cannot simply carry on increasing the prison population, but went on to say:

"I want to see the figure reduced, but we are building more prison places because, inexorably, there will be people who need to be in prison."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 266.]

He sees the increase in the number of people in prison as inexorable, while at the same time, he wants a reduction. I do not think that it is inexorable because we need to find ways of making our penal policy more effective. Let us be clear that only one aspect of prison is effective: it works in only way: protecting the public from the activities of those who are locked up.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that not only the length of a prison sentence is important, but the person's fitness to lead a productive and law-abiding life at the point of release—whenever that happens? There should be opportunities not simply to rehabilitate prisoners' attitudes to life but to educate and train them so that they are ready for employment.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Lady is right and that is the substance of what I shall say shortly.

Prison works in the sense that it stops offenders knocking people over the head or robbing their homes while they are inside. It does not act as a deterrent—that is obvious from the statistics—and it does not reduce reoffending. We have an extraordinary rate of recidivism. In rehabilitation terms, we have a process that does not work. The Liberal Democrats have called for some time for an evidence-based approach, whereby we support the processes that work and reject those that do not in reducing crime and offending.

The public do not want more people in prison; they want less crime on our streets. We therefore need urgently to stabilise and then reduce the prison population.

Dr. Murrison: I accept a great deal of the hon. Gentleman's comments. However, does he accept that one cannot possibly have effective rehabilitation as long as there is overcrowding? The current prison population means that there must be more prison cells. Surely he understands that.

Mr. Heath: Precisely so—there cannot be effective rehabilitation and overcrowding.

However, let us consider the people who are in prison. Are they the right people? I listened carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and read the motion carefully. First, it does not deal properly with those with mental illness in our prison estate. The hon. Gentleman mentioned in passing that 90 per cent. of prisoners have some symptoms of mental illness, but simply went on to say that that means building more prisons. It does not. It means that we should have more treatment centres that are capable of dealing with mental illness. When one in 10 of our prisoners are functionally psychotic and in ordinary cells, it does not do them, the Prison Service or society any good.

I hoped that the new Lord Chancellor would say today that he had reviewed the position on building more prisons and reached the sensible conclusion that we need to build more secure mental health provision in the Prison Service instead. That is the logical way in which to move people who should not be in prison out of the prison estate. That would deal with their needs and those of society. A sensible approach would be to use the money that the right hon. Gentleman has earmarked for prison expansion to increase the places in secure mental health provision. We have only 1,150 places in Ashworth, Broadmoor and Rampton. That is hugely insufficient to meet the needs of the current prison population. Why do we not tackle that scarcity rather than simply building more run-of-the-mill prison cells?

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman consider sex offenders to have mental health problems? How would he tackle the high levels of reoffending among that group of people? They pose a genuine concern to the public and my understanding of Liberal Democrat policy is that proposals about tackling those serious and worrying offenders are unclear.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman uses the term "sex offender", but it covers a wide spectrum of offences. I believe that there are those who need active support through a mental health programme and that it is wrong that they are not given it. However, there is a wider spectrum of those who are simply violent criminals who express their violence in sexual offences. I am not sure whether they fall into the same category—I think that the hon. Gentleman probably agrees.

Additional secure mental health provision is necessary. Secondly, we need secure drug treatment centres. Again, there is a huge lack. Ten thousand prisoners are in prison for drugs offences. We know that three quarters of all male prisoners took illegal drugs in the 12 months before their imprisonment. Yet our secure drug treatment centres have only 2,500 places. Again, I had hoped that, instead of building more bog-standard prisons, we would deal with the problem, which clogs up the system. People cannot be sent for the drug treatments that the courts prescribe through legislation that the Lord Chancellor introduced when he was Home Secretary. Those orders cannot be complied with because insufficient drug treatment places are available.

Meanwhile, notwithstanding the small reduction in illegal drugs that are detected in prisons, drugs remain a major problem in many of our prisons. Many offenders go to prison without a drugs problem but leave with one. Drugs are a major motor of reoffending as they are of crime generally. They are the major motor of acquisitive crime.

Mr. Malins: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. However, when he says that 2,500 drug rehabilitation places are available, he knows that, because of Government underfunding, not nearly all of them are occupied. As well as more beds, we need more funding. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that residential rehabilitation beds are cheaper than prison?

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman is right. They are cheaper—and not only by a bit. I am informed that a residential rehabilitation bed costs £674.10 a week—the hon. Gentleman holds up his excellent pamphlet on the subject, which he was good enough to send me. That is £6,000 less per annum than the equivalent prison place. The case therefore makes economic as well as social policy sense.

My third point takes me back to the comments of the hon. Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson). We hugely underestimate the need and capacity for training and education in prison. If many prisoners share one common characteristic it is that they underperform in their scholastic achievement. Their reading age is generally 50 per cent. below what is expected of an 11-year-old; numeracy is 66 per cent. below, and writing is 80 per cent. below. All those who consider penal policy carefully agree that a major factor in the propensity for criminality is finding it difficult to cope with normal social behaviour because of that lack of attainment.

We should not only massively increase the scope for education—we cannot do that in an overcrowded system—but we must make much of the work in prisons compulsory. We should expand it so that it is much more focused on things that are socially useful. We should also pay prisoners properly for their work in prison, and let it contribute to compensation funds so that we do something for our victims, too.

I hope that the Lord Chancellor has had the opportunity to read the submission from Citizens Advice—

Mr. Straw: Lord Chancellor.

Mr. Heath: What did I say?

Mr. Straw: Lord Justice.

Mr. Heath: Lord Chief Justice—good lord, no.

Mr. Straw: Lord High Chancellor.

Mr. Heath: Indeed, Lord High Chancellor. I ask him to examine the submission from Citizens Advice, which makes sensible suggestions about what could be provided in prison, not only to help prisoners manage their affairs on entry to prison and make sure that their homes and loved ones are properly cared for, but to prepare them effectively for release so that they do not suffer an immediate crisis on leaving prison, which, without proper support, results in reoffending.

Mr. Beith: I want to illustrate my hon. Friend's earlier point, by reminding him that the inspector of prisons has twice reported that Acklington prison in my constituency is unable to fulfil its designated training role because of overcrowding. She has run out of words to describe the situation, which she regards as unsatisfactory.

Mr. Heath: That is not an uncommon situation, sadly. Those who work in the prison education service would give a despondent and discouraging view of what they can now provide and of what they could provide, given appropriate support.

The fourth element in reducing the prison population is doing something much more effective with what are often disparagingly called community sentences—I prefer to call them public service sentences. We have to make them much more appropriate to the crimes that are committed and much more related to the communities in which they are committed.

That point was made by the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge) during his ten-minute Bill speech, which immediately preceded this debate. His Bill hit the nail on the head. He talked about the effect of minor vandalism and graffiti, and about how restorative justice procedures could make people not only put right the damage that they have done within the community, but be seen to be making amends. Also, all the evidence supports the view that they would be far less likely to offend as a result of that than they would be after a short prison sentence. All the evidence shows that sentences of less than three months have very little deterrent effect—in fact, quite the reverse. They tend to encourage a sense of criminality and an identification with criminality among those who might otherwise be diverted from more serious offences. That is something on which we need to concentrate.

My final point about reducing the numbers in the estate is about the position of children. We have 2,200 people under 18 in prison. That is not the right place for children. I accept that there are young offenders who make the lives of people in communities a misery. We need to do something effective to stop them reoffending and, particularly if they are persistent offenders of a certain type, to remove them from the community, so that they can no longer inflict damage upon it. However, I do not think that prison is the right way of doing that. We have to have alternative and more appropriate ways of detaining young people.

I return to restorative justice processes, which are shown to be particularly effective with young people. We have a community justice panel in Chard in Somerset, where there is a 5 per cent. reoffending rate. Let us compare that with the rates for prison and consider which has the most effective outcome.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us why it is that as soon somebody under 18 enters the justice system they cease to be a young person or a youth and they become a child?

Mr. Heath: I am very happy to call the person a child, a youth or whatever the hon. Gentleman chooses. I just note the fact that they are under 18. Therefore, for many of us they are children and they need to be treated as children, even if they are extremely badly behaved children who need particular measures to put them straight. They are still not beyond redemption, although some might take the view that they are.

I want to finish now, because this is a short debate. If those various measures were put in place, we could see a substantial and sustained reduction in the prison population. We need more research on the subject of early release. I am aware that the Lord Chancellor recently received correspondence from a professor of criminology saying precisely that. He has a point: we

do not have a proper research base for the different options available for early release. That needs to be put into effect through controlled trials.

We need more active management of the prison estate. We seem to accept that some of the hugely inefficient and inappropriate Victorian prisons in the centres of cities are still the right way of keeping prisoners, even if they happen to be in the wrong places, to be very expensive and to occupy extremely expensive pieces of land that could be sold for redevelopment. I would like much more active management of the prison estate, so that we can get the most appropriate accommodation in the right places and get rid of some of the large Victorian buildings that have outlived their usefulness as prisons.

My final point touches on what I think the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs was trying to say earlier—there was a little crossfire between the two Front Benches—about what the length of time served in a sentence means. I have long advocated honesty in sentencing and I will continue to do so. It is long overdue and is important to the public attitude towards the criminal justice system. That does not mean that the Executive should have no discretion in the system, but it does mean that judges should construct sentences so that there is a clear term that is going to be served and the public understand that. There should also be an additional term that will be served if there is not appropriate behaviour on the part of the prisoner. Instead of having x minus y, we would have x plus y. If the system made it clear that a prison sentence of a certain duration meant precisely that, the public would have much more confidence in our system and would believe that justice was being done. At the moment I do not believe that they have any such confidence, and the events of the past few weeks have served to undermine that confidence still further.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Had there been a 10-minute limit placed on Back-Bench speeches, this would be the point at which I would be reminding the House of it. However, it would be very helpful if hon. Members who are now about to be called behaved as though there were one.

6.36 pm

Mr. George Howarth (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East) (Lab): I am grateful for that helpful advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and as you know, I always try to follow advice from the Chair. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). He presented his argument in a characteristically thoughtful and good-natured way, but to my mounting horror I found that I agreed with one of his points. I am beginning to assess whether to think through my arguments further.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice—or, as he prefers to be known, Lord High Chancellor—delivered a spirited rendition of the great achievements of the past 10 years. Since he has already done that I will take them as read and not repeat them. Despite all the achievements that he referred to, however, crime, antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime still have a terrible effect on many of our communities, and disproportionately so on the most vulnerable.

We need to place more emphasis on two or three key areas. We need to consider increasing the number of offences that are brought to justice—in other words, to do something about the offences that are committed, but whose perpetrators never end up inside a courtroom, for one reason or another. We need to look at reducing offending, as several hon. Members have already said, and we need to continue the search for better ways of tackling antisocial behaviour.

Just stating those aims does not result in any change. They cover difficult and challenging areas, but I welcome the fact that the Government are rightly addressing them; my right hon. Friend emphasised all three of them in his speech, albeit in perhaps slightly different terms. If we are to make real progress, it is essential that we focus our interventions on what has been shown to be most effective—this is where I agree with the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome. Basically, that means using interventions that have a strong evidence base. It also means talking to offenders, who have direct experience of the criminal justice system.

For a period, I served under my right hon. Friend—perhaps in an undistinguished way—as a junior Minister in the Home Office. I learnt a great deal from talking to young people, mostly men, in young offender institutions. Surprisingly perhaps, they are quite honest. They will talk about things—what they have been involved in, their family background and so on—that they would not be so frank about in other walks of life. There is a great deal to be learnt from that. We can also learn a great deal from their experience. One of the conclusions that I reached was that they had spent far too long in an offending career before anyone even bothered to bring them into a courtroom. We should also be open to adapting the techniques pioneered in other countries to the circumstances that we find in Britain, and to measuring the effectiveness of such experiments against existing practice.

Much attention has been paid to offenders once they get into the criminal justice system—that is what today's debate is about—and many commentators have observed that the system struggles because it is attempting to address wider social problems that are beyond the remit of the prison service. This means that we need to make earlier interventions to address problematic behaviour before it reaches the criminal justice system. Where such interventions work, there are obvious benefits. They reduce the incidence of antisocial behaviour, and there is less pressure on custodial sentences. A recent report from the King's college centre for crime and justice studies stated that

"a growing number of studies show that extended time spent in the company of other problematic young people has a negative influence on an individual's development and their likelihood of staying out of trouble".

True though that might be, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that custodial sentences are still a useful and necessary option. At the very least, those in custody are not at liberty to continue offending.

So what early interventions should we explore? We know that many young offenders have more unstable lives, and that as they get beyond school age they are

[Mr. George Howarth]

more likely to be unemployed and benefit dependent in one way or another. We should consider giving greater access to facilities that help to tackle this as early as possible. Sure Start schemes, for example, start at the very beginning of childhood to give people a better start in life. In Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, there are so-called large schools, in which a range of services for young people and their carers are available. We need to look more closely at such schemes and initiatives.

There are also examples of successful initiatives that introduce more structure into previously chaotic lives. One good example is the advanced skills academy in Liverpool, a military-style project run by ex-military personnel. The academy is designed for young people who are either excluded from school or unlikely to benefit from a conventional education. It offers a structured day and includes activities such as army drill and fitness sessions. It is a relatively new project, and having visited it, I believe that it is a good way to give disaffected young people pride in themselves and to put some structure into their lives.

On a national scale, Skill Force, which was established by the MOD, does a similar job. The Skill Force project that operates in All Saints school in my constituency offers young people positive role models from a military background. The young people find it easy to trust and respect those role models, and that can mean a great deal to otherwise alienated young people. I am working with Lieutenant-Colonel Tony Hollingsworth of the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment and the local education authority in Knowsley to adapt these military approaches as part of the package available for 14 to 19-year-olds. I should add that, if my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice has a spare £50,000 in his budget, this project would be able to make good use of it. I hope to have an opportunity to talk to him about that.

Mr. Straw: I am very interested in that project. My hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Mr. Hendrick) tells me that a similar project in Preston is having similar success. I can make no promises about a spare £50,000—we do not have a spare £50,000—but I will look carefully at any proposition that my right hon. Friend puts forward and do my best to be helpful.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend.

A number of the available interventions offer great benefits. There are many different people with a lot of complex needs, and if we can tailor a range of options and interventions to suit all those different needs, we will have a greater chance of success. As I mentioned earlier, it is essential that we ascertain how effective these interventions are, regardless of the point at which they take place in an offender's career. We need to be able to measure their effectiveness, and to conduct studies of how one intervention compares with another. I believe that there is a lot to be gained from that kind of study.

Time prevents me from saying much more on this subject, but I believe that the reason we have a problem with the number of people in prison today, the number of places available and the costs involved is that we do not pay enough attention at an early stage to how patterns of offending can be prevented before they even start. The kind of interventions that I have described offer some ways forward, but there are many other ideas that are worthy of consideration. I hope that my right hon. Friend will listen hard to the large number of people who have ideas on this subject.

6.46 pm

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): When we have a debate about the NHS, mention is always made of the hard work of nurses. When we debate law and order, mention is usually made of the work of police officers. When we are discussing defence, people always talk about the bravery of our armed forces, and quite rightly so. It is interesting, however, that when we talk about prisons, we never seem to remember the important work done by prison officers. They carry out their work often at great risk to themselves. I believe that seven prison officers are assaulted every day, and those are not minor assaults but serious ones. I hope that the Lord Chancellor will mention those people when he sums up later.

Mr. Straw *rose—*

David T.C. Davies: The right hon. Gentleman was not that generous in giving way to me earlier, if I dare say that to a man held in such esteem. May I just say this to him? Prison officers are not allowed to go on strike at the moment, and I believe that that is right. However, if we are going to prevent them from striking by using the full might of the law, we must recognise their contribution, through financial means. I hope that he will listen, as I do, to Colin Moses, a man whose political views are very far from my own but who exudes a great deal of common sense.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I apologise for the fact that I was not able to give way to him earlier. I am usually pretty accommodating. May I also say that that was an omission from my speech, and I am grateful to be able to add to the record my tribute to prison officers, to probation officers and to the civilian staff in prisons?

David T.C. Davies: I thank the right hon. Gentleman.

The present system of sentencing is an absolute shambles. About the only subject on which I agreed with the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was the need for transparency in sentencing. There has been talk today of letting prisoners out of jail 18 days early, but the reality is that virtually all prisoners are let out early, usually months or even years before the sentence that they have been given by a judge has been completed. Someone sentenced to one year in prison is often out on a tag after only three months. A two-year sentence will often mean just seven and a half months in prison, and a four-year sentence, which is usually handed out for serious crimes such as armed robbery or even rape, will often result in the offender spending only one year and seven and a half months or so in prison.

As for life sentences, the term is a joke. Some research that I did last year showed that, as of April 2006, more than 50 people who had been sentenced to

life imprisonment since 2000 had already been let out, including a rapist who had been let out after just under a year. Our sentencing structure is a complete and utter disgrace. It is nothing more than a confidence trick designed to make the public think that they are a whole lot safer than they are, and that sentences are a lot longer than they are.

I listened with some interest to the Lord Chancellor earlier. It appeared that he and my colleagues on the Front Bench accept the importance of prison and the need to ensure that people spend longer in prison than is currently the case. The same cannot be said for the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, however, who trotted out all the usual arguments put forward by the anti-prison lobby for allowing offenders to run amok on the streets.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the costs involved. If I cannot say anything else in my allotted time today, I want to get this across: prison is actually very cheap indeed. He mentioned a figure of about £36,000 per annum for keeping someone in prison. The Government say that it is about £32,000 a year. In actual fact, we are not talking about category A prisoners here. Everyone—even the Liberal Democrats—accepts that category A prisoners need to be in prison, and they are the most expensive to house. What we are talking about is category B, C and D prisoners, and the actual cost of keeping them in prison is well under £30,000 a year; indeed, I believe it is about £25,000. From that gross figure to the taxpayer, however, one has to remember that three quarters of people entering a prison estate are on various forms of benefits when they do so. In order to get the true net cost to the taxpayer, we have to deduct from that £25,000 the money that they would have been receiving on benefit outside prison. That brings the net cost to the taxpayer to well under £20,000 a year.

We then need to take into account the cost of leaving those people outside prison. The Carter report, to which the Lord Chancellor referred, makes it clear—on page 15, I believe—that most crime in this country is carried out by 100,000 people, of whom only 15,000 are in prison at any given time. It also makes it clear that if we doubled the current prison population from around 80,000 to 160,000, which I think would be the optimum amount, crime in this country would halve. The costs of crime were estimated by the Home Office in 2000 at £60 billion a year, and I have subsequently seen estimates of up to £90 billion a year. That is the total cost to society of the crimes committed in a year.

If we doubled the prison population and spent not £3 billion but £6 billion to house 160,000 people, taking out the 85,000 recidivist offenders, we would actually make a net saving according to the Government's own figures—yes, on the Government's own figures—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, South (Mr. Flello) does not agree with what is in the Carter report, I will give way to him. As I was saying, the Government's own figures suggest that we could make a saving of tens of billions of pounds a year by putting persistent offenders in prison.

Of course, when confronted with the cost argument, all these anti-prison people such as the Liberal Democrats suddenly want to change the subject and they start talking about the rehabilitation rates, as did the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome. It is certainly true that about 60 per cent. of people coming out after a short prison sentence will reoffend, but what the hon. Gentleman does not know, or does not want to know, is that people serving longer prison sentences are much less likely to reoffend. For those serving one to four years, the reoffending rate is 50 per cent.; for those serving four to 10 years, the reoffending rate within two years is 33 per cent.—and that does not include lifers.

What that demonstrates is that, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said, there is no point in putting people in prison for a short time, but there is every reason to put people in for a longer time. Many people entering the prison estate, by the time they have been assessed and then put there, face only a few months of incarceration, so prison officers make life as comfortable as they can for them and leave them to it. What we should be doing is keeping hold of people for at least one to two years and ensuring that they have proper access to the vocational qualifications and the drug-related and anger management courses that they need.

There are two prisons in my constituency. One is a high-security sex offenders prison and the other is an open prison. By the way, a propos of nothing, it is the open prisons that cause the problems, because those are the ones that people walk out of. The sex offenders prison, despite the people who are in there, runs very good vocational courses. It can do that because the prisoners are in there for long enough. That is what we should be offering young offenders and prisoners in the B and C estates. We often cannot do that, because they are simply not in prison for long enough.

On of the greatest problems with prison, apart from the fact that people are completely biased against it, is the fact that we do not do enough to support the prison officers who work in the prison estates. Those who come to see me often complain that although they have access to items such as the retractable baton and gas in adult prisons, they do not have access to them in some young offenders prisons.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome referred earlier to young offenders as "children"—an emotive word. Let me tell him that in my work as an occasional special constable, the first person I arrested was a 16-year-old carrying two handguns—and he had a third one back at his house. In my view, that sort of person is a very serious offender, and I hope he was locked up for it—although I never quite found out what happened. According to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, that offender is an innocent little child who should be left to his own devices. The reality is that we will never tackle crime in this country unless we recognise the importance of putting a certain number of people in prison and keeping them there for long enough to change their behaviour.

The first thing we should do is to stop all forms of early release. That applies to the 18-day scheme in place at the moment—although frankly, it is small beer in comparison with what else is going on—or any other schemes, including tagging and automatic early release. All those need to stop, so that the public can be assured that when a judge hands out a sentence, it will be served in full.

Next, we should ensure that all those who go to prison are kept there long enough to get some form of vocational qualification, and to get off the drugs and

[David T.C. Davies]

alcohol that have so often brought them there in the first place. We need to raise the status of prison officers and stop thinking about them in terms of the documentaries and so-called "docu-films" such as "Scum", which presented the work of prison officers wrongly. The vast majority of prison officers, like the vast majority of police officers, nurses, doctors and other public servants, do an excellent job to very high standards.

If we did all that, we might just have a chance. Unfortunately, we are likely to carry on in the same way. We might get the prison population up to about 90,000, but the length of sentences will not be long enough to deter people from a life of crime, and we will continue to listen to the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Prison Reform Trust—and, unfortunately, the Liberal Democrats, who do not seem to recognise that there are some people who are simply not fit to walk the streets of this country.

6.56 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): I begin by declaring an interest as a Crown court recorder and a district judge who has to deal with some of these problems daily. The motion refers to

"the proper treatment and rehabilitation of offenders"

and that is the main aspect on which I want to concentrate briefly this evening. I wish to focus particularly on education, sport and drug rehabilitation for younger offenders under 21.

I would like to start with two anecdotes. First, about eight or 10 years ago, I talked to a young offender at a Cheltenham remand institution and I asked him what he was doing in there. He told me that he was there because he had been disqualified from driving for the third time and was given a three-month sentence. I asked him about his criminal record, but there was nothing else on it. I then asked him why he got disqualified and he told me that he was driving without a licence and without insurance and they kept catching him. I asked whether he had ever had an accident and he said, "No, of course not. I am a great driver and I have never had an accident". I asked him why on earth he could not get a licence, for goodness' sake—"Because I cannot pass the theory test because I cannot read and write. That is it". That was a perfectly good young man, yet he was given a three-month sentence.

Let us move now to the magistrates court, where I sit as a district judge, and reflect on another young man. Today he stands in the dock; yesterday he walked into a supermarket and walked out, quite unashamedly with a whole lot of razor blades, which he was going to sell to make the money to get his drugs. There he is in the dock; he looks about 60; he is shaking and scratching his arm; he can barely hold his head up. I ask him to confirm his age—20. There is another ruined life. He began life in a dysfunctional family on a bad council estate; he was on solvents at 11, cannabis at 12; he gained no qualifications, no job, nothing. He got into serious drugs and there he goes.

It is worth talking a little about what we can do for our young offenders when they are in custody. Can we make a better fist of it? We would all agree that education is very important indeed. We know what young men are like; we were all young men. I look around the Chamber, and every colleague here this evening was once a young man—

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): One still is!

Mr. Malins: Perhaps one still is. We all know what we went through.

I acquired some statistics recently and they trouble me. I asked the Government—I do not blame any particular Government as Governments of all persuasions share this problem—about the average hours during week days spent in cells by young offenders at young offenders institutions. In other words, how long were these people under 21 locked up in their cells? At Deerbolt, 17 hours; Reading, 17.1 hours; Aylesbury, 16 hours; Brinsford, 16 hours. What the hell is going on? Forgive me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What is going on when we lock our young people up for 16 or 17 hours a day. The average across all young offender institutions is 15 hours a day locked up. We are not talking about an old lag of 50 or 60. We are talking about a young man of 18 or 19, locked up for 15 hours a day on average. That is not good enough.

What are we doing about educating our young men in these establishments? Going back to my man who could not pass his driving test because he could not pass the theory test, why are we not making him read and write? Why are we not giving him some hope when he comes out? I checked a year or so ago the average number of hours spent per week on education by young men in each of our young offender institutions. In Glen Parva, it was 6.4 hours per week. What is going on? In Portland it was 7.4 hours per week, in Reading eight hours per week, and in Rochester nine hours per week. Nine, eight, seven or six hours a week is just not good enough. It is time that we realised that in the House.

David T.C. Davies: My hon. Friend makes an important and powerful point, but are those figures so low because those offenders will not go out and access the facilities available to them, or is that all that is on offer?

Mr. Malins: I do not know the answer to that. I just point out the fact that it is a national disgrace. I suspect that some facilities are not taken up, but it is nevertheless a national disgrace.

Thinking of myself as a young man, I checked how many hours a week are spent on sport—team sport, physical sport, something to get the energy levels going, something that binds people together, gives them standards of discipline and behaving properly. It is absolutely laughable how much time is spent on sport: one hour, two hours, a bit of PE here and there. There is no sign of team sports such as rugby and football. We need to focus on that.

Mr. Nick Hurd (Ruislip-Northwood) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way when he is pressed for time. I could not agree more with the emphasis that he is placing on such activities. Does he share my complete bemusement as to why, given the importance of that agenda, the Government have

dropped purposeful activity of a modest 24 hours a week in prison as a key performance indicator, a target that was met only once in eight years?

Mr. Malins: I agree. It is such a shame.

There we are: those people are locked up for most of the day, with virtually no sport, and very little education. It is a miracle that not everyone who comes out reoffends the next day and reoffends more. Lest I be thought to be a softie, I am not a softie because I can pass a tough sentence when I need to, but I am trying to be constructive, too.

As for drugs, that is a subject worth days of debate. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and I have debated those issues before. He was right: drugs are available in many of these young offender institutions. Youngsters go in and they cannot help themselves. That young defendant at the south London court was out of control with drugs. It is cheaper to put him through a drug residential rehabilitation centre than it is to lock him away for three months or six months, saying "See how it goes." I will tell hon. Members how it goes: it goes very badly. We have to have some cross-party thinking—some thinking from hon. Members on both sides of the House—about what we can do constructively for all our prisoners, not just our young offenders. The record of the past 10, 20 or 30 years is not one of which we can be proud.

7.3 pm

Mr. Nick Hurd (Ruislip-Northwood) (Con): I am conscious of the fact that Front Benchers wish to speak. I wish to add one small point to the debate and to take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). He pointed out that 50 per cent. of crime comes from reoffending. The evidence shows clearly that some basic things need to be provided to support people to turn away from that path. One is some accommodation to go to; another is some family support to tap into; and the third is a job and some prospect of meaningful employment.

I recommend to the Minister that he takes some time to look at an initiative in my constituency introduced by Blue Sky. That initiative was set up by Mick May in partnership with Groundwork locally and it is supported by Hillingdon council. It is the only company in the country that insists on someone having a criminal record before entering its employment. It employs ex-cons basically to clean up and to green Hillingdon and to look after the parks. They are highly visible, making a contribution to the community. If the Minister were to talk to the people on that scheme, he would recognise how crucial to their lives those six months at Blue Sky are. One young man travels two hours a day to take part because he sees it as his lifeline at that crucial moment after he exited prison.

Innovative voluntary projects such as that are making a huge difference, but the Government and the Prison Service, and the culture of "Not invented here" seem to be so resistant. We have to open our minds.

7.4 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I thank my hon. Friends and other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I think that the Secretary of State would agree that that was probably not the best of his speeches, but I do not want to abuse him too much in his absence. He has apologised for the fact that he cannot be here for the winding-up speeches because he has to give evidence to the Select Committee that is chaired by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith).

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), I want to confess to being a Crown court recorder and to having to deal with the sort of feeble people who appear before the courts week in, week out—feeble intellectually, socially and in terms of mental and physical health—on that great conveyor belt of people who come before district judges, recorders and pretty well every other member of the judiciary who have to deal with criminal defendants in that jurisdiction. What both my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Hurd), who spoke cogently, if briefly, have said is key. We will never reduce reoffending until we get a better product, if I can use that hideous expression, coming out of our custodial establishments, be they young offender institutions, or adult prisons, and until we get people who are off drugs, can read, can write, are physically healthy and motivated, so that they can lead sensible and constructive lives.

The Conservative party's review of this area of debate will be led by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). One of the many things that it will think hard about is incarceration because that is an important and central part of any criminal justice policy. I hope that that pleases my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies). It will also ensure that we do not simply incarcerate, but do something with the people whom we incarcerate when they are in prisons, young offender institutions or secure training units, so that when they come out—most people who are sent into custody are released at some stage; only about 1 or 2 per cent. of those who are sent into custody never come out again—they can go to the jobcentre, read what is on offer and get a job, and they can stagger out into the streets healthy rather than looking for the next fix.

At the moment, other than those people who are released on ECL, as it is called nowadays, I think that most prisoners get demob money of about £45 to £50. Far too many of them go straight to the nearest railway cutting and buy the next fix, and around they go again. It will not do. It is a waste of everyone's money. It is not an absence of Conservative thinking to say, "Let us think rather more carefully about what we do in prison with prisoners, just as we want to think about what we do outside prison to prevent offending and reoffending."

Sir Patrick Cormack: I will be brief. I have been much impressed by the achievements of some of the community restorative justice schemes in Northern Ireland. Is that something that we could have a look at?

Mr. Garnier: Yes. The Secretary of State thought it amusing to chide me for having admitted to Mary Ann Sieghart in an article that she wrote in *The Times* nearly 18 months ago, when I was appointed by the Leader of the Opposition to shadow the prisons portfolio, that I was on a voyage of discovery. The one

[Mr. Garnier]

thing about being on a voyage of discovery is that one looks, learns and sees and one gains from the experience of looking and learning. Rather than arrogantly saying that we know everything, those of us on a voyage of discovery allow ourselves to be influenced by the people we have met and by what we have seen on that voyage. Part of that voyage of discovery has taken me to 25 custodial institutions, adult prisons and young offender institutions in England and Wales. That is probably rather more—I am subject to correction—than the present Lord Chancellor visited when he was Home Secretary and started the fiasco that we are now having to sort out. It is true that the Minister has already been to one or two prisons. *[Interruption.]* He says that he has been to eight in eight weeks; that is very good, but he ought to go to many more to see the evidence of the failure of his Government's policies, and they should then come up with some better ones.

I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth that we tend to forget about the prison officers who have to work and live in very difficult circumstances day in and day out. Let me give an example: 18 months ago a wing of Norwich prison had to be decanted because inmates were living in their own sewage and officers were having to work in it. That is a disgusting state of affairs, and it was presided over by this Government thanks to their overcrowding policy. Because of overcrowding and the Government's incompetent management of our prison system, that disgusting wing has had to be refilled with prisoners and officers. I have some sympathy for the prisoners, who have been sent to prison because of their misdemeanours, but I have a huge amount of sympathy for the prison officers working in both private and public prisons who have to endure such unattractive circumstances in their working lives.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) was right to stress the importance of early intervention. Many of the problems we face, such as the current overcrowding in our prison estate, arise because people are allowed to slip through the net at far too young an age. That might have happened because of family breakdown, drugs or drink; but whatever the cause is, the Government have failed to get a grip on it, and I encourage them to follow the right hon. Gentleman's advice on intervention.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack) mentioned restorative justice. It is hugely valuable, but only in a limited number of cases; it works well only where there is the right defendant and the right victim and both of them agree that it is the right process to go through. If it does not work well, it goes badly wrong, but I have sometimes seen it work extremely well—in Wandsworth and in Cardiff, for instance—and it is of huge value to the criminal justice system.

Sadly, I have little time in which to deliver what should be a half-hour speech, but I shall endeavour to persuade the Government that our motion is worthy of support. On 12 July, the new Secretary of State for Justice unburdened himself to the Murdoch press by calling for a national debate on the prison overcrowding crisis. He said that he wanted to send fewer people to prison. Some of us will remember the Secretary of State as the last Home Secretary but three and the man who was in charge of prisons and criminal justice policy from 1997 to 2001—half the period that this Government have been in office—but anyone would think from what he said that he considers the mess that he and his colleagues have created to be a totally surprising state of affairs.

The Government's policy then and now is to be seen as being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. In order to demonstrate that, they have created 3,000 additional criminal offences, introduced 65 criminal justice statutes and decreed that more people should be sent to prison, and for longer. However, they have failed to understand that that will result in the prisons filling up. If they had planned sensibly, they would have ensured that there was sufficient capacity in the prisons to accommodate the additional people being sent there as a result of public policy.

Overcrowded prisons are the rock on which this Government's criminal justice policy has foundered. If we have overcrowded prisons, we can achieve nothing with prisoners. If we can achieve nothing with prisoners because the prison estate is overcrowded, we will not reduce reoffending but we will increase the danger to the public. My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth wants to reduce reoffending to protect the public—our electors and taxpayers. The Government must get their head around the simple equation that overcrowding equals sclerosis and ineffective rehabilitation of offenders. This is not about being soft; it is about being competent—it is about using money wisely, and ensuring that the citizens of our country can, as my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs said, walk out of their houses or come home from their jobs without being hit on the head by some demented drug addict who wants their purse or wallet.

As has been said in the debate, a huge proportion of those who commit crimes are under the influence of drugs. In the main, it is addicts who commit crimes, not criminals who become drug addicts. What my hon. Friend the Member for Woking said on this matter was right: until the Government deal with that fact, they will be putting the cart before the horse.

The Government make a further mistake. They assume that when they say that they have built 20,000 new prison places since 1997, the public believe that it is true. That is not true. They have increased the number of prisoners by more than 20,000, and they have sought to reduce that in a panic-driven way through the ECL scheme, which will over the course of the next year lead to an increase of 25,000 in the number of people being pushed out of prison early and produce a net reduction in the prison population of only 1,250.

Mary Riddell noted this weekend in *The Observer* that despite ECL, the prison population would increase by 500 a week. If that is competent management of our prison system, I am a banana—and I am not talking about Robert Peel. The Government have not produced 20,000 additional spaces, as they claim. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs said, they have merely doubled-up single cells,

trebled-up double cells and created a continuing and growing mess. It is a mess of their own making, and I wish I had longer to speak on it. It is not only a national disgrace, but criminally reckless.

7.17 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Mr. David Hanson): I thank Members for the tone in which they have conducted the debate.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) has just admitted that he might be a banana. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Wansdyke (Dan Norris) will back me up in that there are certainly some banana splits on the Opposition Benches today as there is a difference in policy approach between the hon. and learned Gentleman and the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) and other Opposition Members who have made different points.

I do not duck the fact that there are serious issues that need to be tackled in respect of the prison population, or that we face challenges in preventing reoffending and ensuring that our citizens get what they deserve: a crime-free society in which they can live safely in their homes and communities. I could go on about the fact that there is 35 per cent. less crime in our society now than there was when the Conservative party was in office, but that would not be a constructive way to approach the debate.

There is common ground on some of the challenges we face. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), the hon. and learned Gentleman and the hon. Member for Woking agree that we need to slow the growth in the prison population, and that is clearly true. There are 79,500 people in prison, and according to Government forecasts—which are due to be revised in October—that figure might rise to between 102,000 and 104,000 by 2012. We have planned some 9,500 new prison places—real ones—and for new prisons, extensions to prisons and units to be built over the next five years, but it is clear that a gap remains between the number of new places and the forecasted rise in the prison population. We have two options. As the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) said, we can raise even further the number of prison places. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) would happily support that, and I suspect that the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) would also support it. However, I do not think that the hon. and learned Gentleman or the hon. Member for Woking would support that principle.

We need to look at how we manage prison population issues for the future. We are clear that we need to build extra prison places to meet present need, but we also need—as I have said to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome in correspondence and discussions on the matter—to try to reduce the growth in the prison population.

There is further common ground on the need for early intervention. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) made a thoughtful speech on that point, as did the hon. Member for Woking. We need to reduce reoffending and make prisons a place where learned skills and employability—not only in prison, but on the outside—become a reality. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Hurd) touched on that issue and I concur with the points that he made.

Whatever we do, we need to ensure that we reduce crime, and that is also common ground. Every drop in crime means fewer of my constituents—and every other hon. Member's constituents—suffering the burden of crime. We need to tackle the issue of clarity in sentencing and we need to consider the impact of sentencing policy on the prison population.

It has not been mentioned today, but we need to consider penal policy as it affects women. I will shortly consider the report by Baroness Corston, and I will give a response to it in the autumn. I will consider how we can reduce the number of women in prison, because a prison sentence affects not only the person imprisoned, but the families, the community and the people with whom they live, work and share lives, and it is clear that there are too many women in prison at present.

We are agreed that we need to reduce reoffending, protect the public and plan for the future. If I may make a minor political point, it has been evident today that there is a difference of approach between the hon. Member for Monmouth, who, I remind the House, urged that 160,000 people should be put in prison, at a cost that even the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne) would not—

David T.C. Davies: Perhaps the Minister did not hear the argument. Page 15 of the Carter report clearly states that if one put in prison the 85,000 recidivist offenders who are out on the streets, the crime rate would halve. If the crime rate halved, the net saving to the state would be between £30 billion and £45 billion a year. Therefore, building more prisons is one of the best bargains that the taxpayer could have.

Mr. Hanson: I do not know which Carter report the hon. Gentleman is reading, but the Carter report to which I refer has not yet been written or published by Lord Carter. We have given him terms of reference, which he is considering, but the report will be brought back to the House and Ministers in the autumn.

The Government have a clear strategy to build more prison places, to prevent reoffending, to make community sentences a reality, and to consider how we tackle the problems of drugs, housing and employability both outside and inside prison. However, with due respect to Conservative Members, there appears to be a clear split between those, such as the hon. and learned Gentleman, who wish to see a focus on drug treatment, employability and the causes of crime, including improvements in literacy and housing provision, and those such as the hon. Gentleman, who said today that he wants to double the prison population, and the right hon. Gentleman, who wants to see more prisons built, whatever it takes. But the hon. Member for Tatton is not willing to commit resources even to the 9,500 places that I have promised.

Mr. Garnier: I know that the Minister is in full flow, but I do not wish him to continue to mislead himself, because it is embarrassing for him. The split that he is trying to create will be no truer simply because he

[Mr. Garnier]

repeats a canard. There is no split between Conservative Front Benchers about the need to have capacity into which to put the prisoners whom his Government will insist on putting into prison in industrial numbers. If one cannot produce the capacity, one cannot run a proper prison system.

Mr. Hanson: I will reflect on what the hon. and learned Gentleman has said about there being no splits between Conservative Front Benchers. I beg to differ, but I will not detain the House with the arguments today. I shall simply point out that the hon. Member for Tatton has not committed to a single penny of resources to meet the extra prison building programme or for the ambitious targets that the hon. and learned Gentleman sets for preventing reoffending. That is an issue that he needs to address, because we will return to it before the election in terms of resources to meet the needs of our prison population.

Hon. Members will be aware that Lord Carter has established clear terms of reference for the review of prisons and will report before the end of this year. We are considering value for money in the prison system, the efficiency of public sector prisons, the potential for further cost renewal of the prison estate, the impact of recommendations on the prison estate in terms of criminal justice policy, and the sentencing framework.

We need to undertake work on the prevention of reoffending. The figures for the past year show that more than 19,800 offenders have successfully completed offending programmes and 55,500 offenders have completed unpaid work. Many offenders have started and completed drug rehabilitation requirements, with more than 14,000 starts and 6,000 completions last year. The highest rates ever of enforcement have also been reached.

I am happy to look at what we do on reoffending. Indeed, the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood mentioned the Blue Sky project. I will happily come and see that project in his constituency, because we need to learn lessons about what works. We have a target of a 5 per cent. reduction in reoffending and the Labour Government have exceeded that target by 6.9 per cent. We will increase the target to 10 per cent. in the very near future. We need to do more, but—I repeat—that requires resources, which my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Prime Minister and I are willing to commit, but which the Opposition are not willing to commit.

Other valid and real issues were raised in the debate, including early intervention, and the effect of imprisonment for public protection sentences on the prison population. There are 2,500 IPP prisoners and the number is rising. We are reviewing that issue and we need to learn the lessons of how to manage that population in the prison system in a positive way. The issue of foreign national prisoners has been mentioned. There are 8,000 foreign national prisoners in jails in England and Wales, and we need to look at what we do with the top five countries represented to try to make some progress on those issues.

The issue of mental health was raised by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, and we need to look at that. It also requires resources and working with the NHS to tackle problems in the community and in prison. I am proud of the fact that the Prison Service and the police are co-operating to improve facilities in hospital and drug treatment, alcohol treatment and drug treatment orders.

We also need to consider the black and ethnic minority prison population, which is disproportionately high. We need to consider the issue of recalls to prison, with more than 5,000 prisoners being recalled. What can we do to ensure that recalled individuals are identified earlier and that intervention occurs to prevent that recall? We need to consider the issues of remand in prison and bail hostels. We are putting in place 1,000 new bail hostel places over the next six months at a significant cost to the taxpayer—money that the Conservative party has, in the past, opposed. We also need to consider sentencing policy and several other issues.

Restorative justice was mentioned by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack). As a Northern Ireland Minister, I had a great deal to do with restorative justice schemes. They have a role and we need to evaluate them. Evaluations in England and Wales are ongoing, but there is potential to bring offenders—young and old—face to face with the consequences of their crime and we should look at how we can do that locally.

There is much common ground between the Opposition and the Government. Where we differ is in the fact that the Government are willing to put in resources, build prison places, prevent reoffending and strengthen community sentences—to make a real difference with resources and will. We have them; the Conservative party does not.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 156, Noes 355.

Division No. 196] **[7.29 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Mr. David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Butterfill, Sir John
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David

Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hayes, Mr. John
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Johnson, Mr. Boris
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maples, Mr. John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Osborne, Mr. George
Paice, Mr. James
Paisley, rh Rev. Ian
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Ruffley, Mr. David
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stewart Jackson and Jeremy Wright

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, Danny
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Cairns, David
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
Davey, Mr. Edward
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, David
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hunter, Mark
Hutton, Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric

Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kramer, Susan
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, Mr. David
Laws, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Opik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, Mr. Alan
Reid, rh John
Rennie, Willie
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rogerson, Dan
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Rowen, Paul
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Smith, Sir Robert
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thurso, John
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wills, Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Steve McCabe and
Mr. Alan Campbell

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 175.

Division No. 197] **[7.45 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank

Dorrhoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winnerton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Alan Campbell and Steve McCabe

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Alexander, Danny
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bone, Mr. Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Lorely
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clark, Greg
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul

Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Hayes, Mr. John
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Johnson, Mr. Boris
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Lefwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Paisley, rh Rev. Ian
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Sammy
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stewart Jackson and Jeremy Wright

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the record of the Government which has since 1997 cut crime, reformed the penal system, invested in record prison places, created a legislative framework which provides tough and effective sentences, introduced risk assessment and offender management systems, introduced and seen ever increasing numbers of offenders complete accredited programmes, enabled record numbers of offenders to pay back to the community through unpaid work, ensured that offenders in the community who pose a risk to the public are recalled to custody, radically reformed the youth justice system and brought the prison and probation services together under the National Offender Management Service with a renewed focus on protecting the public and reducing re-offending.

Global Poverty

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): The next motion is on global poverty. I must advise the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment that stands in the name of the Prime Minister and that there will be a 10-minute limit on all Back-Bench speeches in the debate.

7.57 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House reaffirms the cross-party commitment to increase the aid budget to 0.7 per cent. of gross national income by 2013; recognises the ability of effectively organised aid to contribute to sustainable economic development in low income countries; acknowledges the need to avoid imposing over-prescriptive conditions on aid; supports the wider use of tracking surveys and independent accounting as well as increased independent scrutiny of the United Kingdom's aid budget to make the ultimate destination of aid payments more transparent; welcomes the suggestion that donors should work together in partnership trusts to ensure coordination of bilateral aid budgets in each recipient country; and urges the Government to work towards the unilateral removal by the EU of trade barriers against low income countries.

This topic is, by common consent, probably the most important one that the world currently faces. Probably the worst feature of our world is that so many people live in dire poverty. That is a matter of consensus among not just ourselves and Government Members, but Liberal Members and, indeed, I am glad to say, the whole political establishment in Britain, but I wonder whether it is as keenly felt by all our fellow citizens as it might be.

I certainly admit that, over a number of years, the Conservative party, although it shared the consensus on spending, for example, and has done for many years in this field, did not pay the subject the attention it was due. One of the very first things that happened when my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) became leader of the party is that we asked my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who is in his place, to chair a policy review group to look into how we might propose sensible, robust and effective policies to improve Britain's performance in this area.

Stephen Hesford (Wirral, West) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentions the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron). Does he agree with me and the *Daily Mail* that the right hon. Member for Witney would be better placed in his own constituency, looking after the flood victims, rather than chasing a photo opportunity in Rwanda?

Mr. Letwin: I hope that, as we proceed with what I, at least, intend to be a serious debate on the most pressing problem of the world, we will not descend to partisan repartee. In fact, over the years, it will be seen that the commitment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney to this subject and his willingness to continue with his engagement, notwithstanding the considerable political pressure to the contrary, is a sign of the same kind of commitment that is displayed by the fact that the group chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden has now produced what is, by common consent of those who are expert in the field, a very serious piece of work. Today we met a large number of representatives of the non-governmental organisations, who had many good and useful things to say in support of much of what is in the report. I hope that the debate will be the beginning of a prolonged national discussion of the propositions in the report. We certainly intend that discussion to inform our policy as it emerges.

The report does much more than merely commit to a seriousness in relation to the relief of global poverty. It refocuses the discussion of the relief of global poverty. In particular, it offers a clear view of what the route out of global poverty is and has to be. In a way, what it says on that ought to have been obvious, but, over the past 20 or 30 years—this is not a partisan point; it is a point about the trend of British government over many years—it has not been followed up as if it were obvious. The report says that the way out of poverty is economic development and growth. It points out that our policies as a country have been, to a degree, deficient, in that we have failed to do as much as we could have done for growth in low-income countries.

In particular, the report points to two parts of our policy that have been, to a degree, deficient: first, our policy on trade and, secondly, our policy on aid. The report makes a bold proposition about trade, which it describes under the heading of a "real trade campaign". It proposes that Britain and our partners in the European Union should join together and seek to achieve a unilateral disarmament in our barriers against trade from low-income countries. I stress the word "unilateral". The report does not propose that we should merely demand a reciprocal reduction in barriers on the part of low-income countries. On the contrary, it proposes that we should tear down the barriers and offer what is built on the everything-but-arms basis. But, more than that, it involves a significant change in the rules of origin. It proposes that that should be offered to low-income countries on a unilateral basis, from the European Union. That is a major potential step forward in the thinking about how we can open ourselves up to trade that may benefit us, but, much more importantly, offers the prospect of growth and economic development in parts of the world that do not have it in sufficient quantities.

It is of course critical that the report deals not just with unilaterally tearing down barriers against trade from low-income countries, but with the need to encourage and foster south-south trade—trade between low-income countries. It makes a number of proposals about how that too can be encouraged. Nor is it the case that the report deals merely with tearing down barriers to trade. It also makes it clear that aid itself needs to be oriented more firmly towards the promotion of trade. I will come on to that as I describe the report's propositions on aid. This is an important step forward in thinking about trade, and the ability of the UK and our partner countries to promote trade from low-income countries.

The report is equally committed to improvements in our aid programme. I stress that the report does not suggest that our aid programme is a disaster or that the Department for International Development does nothing right. As the Secretary of State will see if he chooses to read the report at some stage, it provides a

[Mr. Letwin]

fair-minded and balanced analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the way in which DFID has been going about its business.

The report suggests that our aid programme could be improved significantly if various things happened. First, our aid programme could be more devoted to economic development than has recently become fashionable. The report notes that, a couple of decades ago, aid for economic development began to acquire a bad name—partly because of tied aid, which by common consent we now do not believe in, and partly because of large-scale projects that did not work out right. The Secretary of State is nodding his head, but if he thinks that it was merely one set of Governments that failed in those respects, rather than many, he is wrong. It was a common failing, both across different Administrations in the UK and across other Administrations in other countries. The report argues that, as a result of all that, aid aimed at economic development acquired an unduly bad name.

Secondly, the report notes that not only did aid have attached to it for a considerable period the wrong conditionality of being tied to our exports, but, following that period, it had attached to it—and still has attached to it—what the report regards as an excessively prescriptive view of how the aid is to be used. The report argues for a different form of conditionality. It argues that aid can do serious things—if it is the right kind of aid, rightly delivered—for the development of agriculture and of the economy as a whole in low-income countries. It argues that microfinance institutions and demand-led funding can make a significant difference to the development of those countries.

The report argues that the conditionality that needs to apply is transparency. It argues for the much wider use of expenditure tracking surveys, independent accounting and efforts to make sure that outcomes match inputs. The report argues that DFID and Britain would be better served if there were an independent evaluation group, reporting to a Select Committee and looking into the outcomes achieved by DFID. The report notes that the public service agreements and the objectives of DFID are wide in nature and not sufficiently related to the outcomes achieved by aid.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is certainly presenting an interesting argument. Given the fact that a great deal of British aid is spent through multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the development banks, how does he propose that we would track the outcomes and hold those organisations properly to account?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Lady asks an interesting question. The report does offer a route to achieving that. The route has another advantage as well. The report suggests that—this is something of which I have had a good deal of personal experience in the various African countries in which I have worked—the often fragile governmental organisations in low-income countries suffer from an excess of bureaucratic requirements from a range of well-meaning donor countries and well-meaning multilateral donors. It points to the extent to which the bureaucracies in those countries can be forced to complete a huge number of forms and responses for those many donors.

As a way of dealing with that—this would also do what the hon. Lady and I both seek—the report suggests the formation of what it calls partnership trusts. They would be bodies in the recipient countries that would be co-operatives, or partnerships, involving a range of donor countries with aid programmes in those countries, and multilateral institutions. On their boards would also sit, perhaps as observing rather than voting members, various local non-governmental organisations, governmental observers and so forth. In that way, the aid programmes from many different sources could be co-ordinated more efficiently and be made subject more effectively to expenditure tracking and independent accounting.

The report proposes that the process that I have described would enable one to envisage encouraging the media and other organisations of civil society in recipient countries to invigilate the effectiveness with which the aid reaches the schools, hospitals, farms and infrastructure projects to which it was directed. It argues that that is likely to provide a more sustainable basis for checks and balances against corruption and poor governance than present arrangements.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is making an interesting case and I welcome the contribution to the debate on global poverty. Does he accept that building up the capacity of the local finance ministry is the ultimate priority for many developing countries? Is there not a danger that setting up a parallel structure would put pressure and strain on their resources that they could not sustain? To be fair to the Department for International Development, one of the benefits of budget support is that the Department has to work with the local finance ministry to deliver that accountability. Setting up a parallel structure poses risks, whereas establishing a successful finance ministry would be a good start.

Mr. Letwin: I wholly agree with the right hon. Gentleman, as I think would my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr. Mitchell), the shadow Secretary of State. Building up the capacity of finance ministries is a crucial component, and the report makes that very point. That is why it favours direct budgetary support, rather than highly prescriptive aid on one side. Indeed, it goes further, arguing that support for health programmes would be better achieved by giving direct budgetary support that is then passed on to the health system as a whole than by minutely targeting specific health initiatives that turn out not to have the infrastructure and support that is needed to maintain them.

Neither I nor the report suggests that a parallel structure that undercuts a recipient country's finance ministry be established. On the contrary: the report suggests setting up a partnership trust of donors whose board could discuss its programmes with the local finance ministry, and that that could enable the finance ministry to do better at finding ways to render transparent how the money is used. It could also enable civil society in the recipient country to invigilate the

finance ministry. The idea is to create a sustainable process in that country, and not impose a parallel process from outside.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend is familiar with my International Development (Anti-Corruption Audit) Bill, which I introduced early last year. In it, I suggested a mechanism by which, in countries where it was transparent that corruption was rife, the finance ministries and public accounts committees could have an independent, external audit carried out by Parliaments and international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Does he think that that proposal should be pursued, as a way of making sure that children no longer die at the present rate? For example, poor water and sanitation mean that one child dies every 15 seconds. I know that the report is excellent, but we must not underestimate the importance of external audit when the countries concerned are simply not listening to what we say.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden will succeed in catching your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and be able to speak for himself. However, I think that I can say on his behalf that he was indeed aware of my hon. Friend's contribution, as was I. If the proposed measures are to be effective, independent audit will be an important component. In the report, there is considerable discussion of the need for independent audit, although it suggests that it should be conducted under the local finance ministry and not be imposed from outside.

However, I can go further. The report also makes immensely important suggestions about the need for a new corruption Act in the UK., and about the need to do better at tracking our unwitting participation in corruption abroad as a result, for example, of activities that may be going on in the financial centre that is London.

I know that many colleagues want to speak, so I shall summarise my argument. The report is not conceived in a partisan spirit. It is the product of an immense amount of consultation and work—with NGOs, recipient country Governments, and experts from across the world. It has a remorselessly growth-oriented focus, and argues that both trade and aid can make colossal contributions to promoting growth in low-income countries. It argues for a radical proposal across the EU to remove barriers to trade, and for aid that is provided on a basis that is less prescriptive but more transparent. It believes that such aid is more likely to be effective and better directed at promoting the growth permitted by the removal of trade barriers.

I believe that the report will form the basis of a considerable, ongoing discussion. I hope so, as that may assist the Government—and the Opposition, as we formulate our policy responses in this critical area.

Before I close, I want to say one other thing. I welcome the Liberal Democrat amendment, although I know that Mr. Speaker did not select it for debate. If Liberal Democrat colleagues read the relevant sections of the report, they will find them penetrated throughout by a recognition of the critical significance of adaptation to climate change in low-income countries, and the necessity to pass the aid programme through what it calls the "filter" of its effects on climate change.

Hugh Bayley (City of York) (Lab): On several occasions, the right hon. Gentleman has said that there is growing basis of cross-party support in this area of policy, and I am very pleased by what is a very welcome change. However, does he see anything in the Government amendment to the Opposition motion with which he disagrees? Is the level of cross-party support such that there is no need to divide the House at the end of the debate?

Mr. Letwin: I would have welcomed it if the Government had not tabled an amendment, although I did not expect that. I am not sure that our motion contains anything with which the Government particularly disagree. The Government amendment essentially agrees with much of the substance of the motion, but adds congratulations, on a considerable scale, to the Government. It is, so to speak, a "Toad of Toad Hall" amendment: there is nothing amiss with that and I can quite understand the principle but, if the hon. Gentleman supposes that we would vote for a mass of unnecessary congratulation, he is stretching my impartiality and non-partisan nature a mite too far.

8.19 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"acknowledges the Government's global leadership on international development; welcomes the Government's stated objective to increase the aid budget to 0.7 per cent. of gross national income by 2013; further welcomes the widespread support which this policy has secured; further acknowledges the centrality of effectively delivered aid to low income countries' sustainable economic development; welcomes the Government's untying of aid; supports the United Kingdom Government's moves to establish an independent evaluation mechanism and its increased focus on aid effectiveness, results and impact; and acknowledges that the UK Government is working at the multilateral and bilateral levels to remove the trade barriers which developing countries face and to help them take advantage of new market opportunities through the provision of aid for trade."

Two weeks ago, the United Nations published a report showing progress towards the millennium development goals. The scale of the remaining challenge is clear: every minute, a woman dies in pregnancy or childbirth, and as we have heard, every 15 seconds a child dies because they did not have access to clean water and sanitation. Each year, malaria claims 1 million lives, tuberculosis nearly 2 million lives, and AIDS 3 million lives. It is seven years since the world pledged to "spare no effort" to free men, women and children from extreme poverty, yet only one of the eight regions of the world cited in the UN report is on track to achieve all the millennium development goals.

However, we can—and we must—make a difference. The Department for International Development's work is rightly respected around the world. The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development said that the United Kingdom

[Mr. Douglas Alexander]

"offers a powerful model for development cooperation."

The Canadian Institute of International Affairs said that the Department is

"generally considered to be the best"—

development agency—

"in the world."

The Leader of the Opposition was perhaps rather more charitable than Opposition Front Benchers have been this evening: he was willing to make the point forcefully last year that

"We should...be proud of the Department for International Development's achievements",

and he described it as

"the leading national aid agency."

Indeed, it is estimated that the Department's work lifts 3 million people out of poverty every year. I put that evidence before the House not out of complacency or false pride, but out of determination that the Department should build on its success in the years ahead to help more of the world's poor. We must do so with an informed understanding of the challenges facing us at the start of this young century—migration, climate change, conflict, and of course disease, which we have already mentioned.

The White Paper "Eliminating world poverty: making governance work for the poor", published just over a year ago, sets out how we will tackle global poverty in a changing world—a world in which, each year, more than 190 million people leave their shores in search of a better life; in which climate change is not a theory, but a fact of life for many struggling with floods, drought and crop failures; in which scarce resources threaten to spark new conflicts; and in which disease can spread rapidly across continents.

Later, I will talk about the contribution that the international community can make in helping the world's poorest people to tackle those challenges, but what happens within their borders is critical to their future. That is why good governance was at the heart of the White Paper. Good governance is about building effective states that are capable of providing political stability, rules and services for their citizens, that respond to what people want, and which are accountable to them. Every society will, of course, reach good governance in its own way. Our role is to support Governments, Parliaments, civil society, the media, trade unions and all the actors who will play an important role in forging that path.

Notwithstanding the floods at home, Rwanda has been in the news, and I applaud the Leader of the Opposition's courage in spending 24 or 48 hours in that country at a difficult time for him and his party. Let us focus on that country for a moment. The United Kingdom has provided £380 million of assistance to Rwanda over the past 10 years, and has helped to implement public service and land reforms, and to ensure improvements to health and education. The result was that Rwanda's economy grew by over 10 per cent. a year for a decade. The proportion of Rwandans living on less than a dollar a day has fallen from 70 per cent. in 1994 to 57 per cent. last year.

Even where governance standards are at their lowest, as in Zimbabwe, we will not abandon the poorest people; that would doubly punish the people in those afflicted countries. As the Government announced only last week, the Department has committed £50 million to providing seeds, fertilizers, livestock and access to HIV/AIDS care, through tried and tested partners, so that we can assist 2 million of the most vulnerable Zimbabweans.

As well as safeguarding our aid, we must use it to fight the causes of corruption. The extractive industries transparency initiative brings together global business, Governments and non-governmental organisations to show how much money Governments receive from oil, gas and mining revenues. The Nigerian Government estimate that in one year alone that new transparency index saved $1 billion that would otherwise have been lost through corruption. That is money that can and should be spent on basic services, such as health and education services, clean drinking water and sanitation, and a safety net that people can rely on when times are hard. The White Paper committed us to increasing our spending on those public services, so that it becomes at least half of our bilateral aid budget.

We will make more long-term commitments to help developing countries plan for not one or two years, but for a decade—commitments such as the one that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made in Mozambique last year, when he pledged that the United Kingdom would spend £8.5 billion over 10 years to get every child into school. That will mean that countries that certainly need support can build a school and know that the money will be there to maintain it, and can train teachers, knowing that they can afford to pay a salary at the end of the training.

There has already been much discussion on the Floor of the House on growth and trade this evening, so let me turn to those issues.

Mr. Cash: Unfortunately, when the former Prime Minister went to the G8, no progress was made on water and sanitation—issues that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. However, the former Prime Minister did write to me on 25 June, as he was leaving office, to say that the issue would be put on the agenda for next year's G8. Would the Secretary of State be good enough to confirm that that is Government policy?

Mr. Alexander: Of course I am happy to confirm that water and sanitation are continuing sources of concern to us, and I will certainly make sure that I write to the hon. Gentleman after this evening's debate about the agenda for the G8 in the years to come.

The hon. Gentleman's observation on partnership and working collectively in the G8 brings to mind a concern regarding trade policy that I would like raise with his Front-Bench team. I applaud the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) for saying that we must work effectively to open our doors more completely, so that we allow poorer countries the opportunity to trade their way out of poverty, but surely the right hon. Gentleman accepts that if we are to exercise genuine influence in a debate on trade policy, it behoves us to work constructively and effectively with our European partners.

Notwithstanding the fanfare of today's announcement about new campaigns, given that trade is a competence of the European Commission I struggle to understand how it assists endeavours to build a genuine coalition for fair trade within the European Union if only one party in one single country is willing to identify itself with the modern Conservative party. Surely that powerfully makes the case for the Conservative party to stay within the European People's party alliance, which allows mainstream voices in the European Union to be heard. If one limits oneself to speaking to a particular Czech nationalist party, which, as I understand it, does not even accept the existence of climate change, one's leverage and purchase in debate on trade policy will be commensurately diminished.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): I visited Burundi and Rwanda last month with colleagues from the all-party group on the great lakes region and genocide prevention, and the point was made time and again that the Department for International Development is doing a tremendous job in offering support. People were also very complimentary about our EU partners, and the help that they give the Department to ensure that support reaches the areas where it is most needed.

Mr. Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his observations, and I, too, pay tribute to the work of the all-party group. I know that my hon. Friend was in the Rwandan Parliament when a historic commitment was made to abolishing the death penalty in that country. Given its great troubles in recent decades, that was truly a historic day. He makes a point that is well taken by Members on both sides of the House: we must do more than simply send delegations to visit such countries. We must build effective partnerships that can support those countries in their journey from poverty to development. I return to the point that I made earlier: the European Union offers an extremely powerful mechanism by which we can strengthen our capacity to assist those countries by working effectively and collaboratively.

Malcolm Bruce: On exactly that point, when the Select Committee has met the European Commission, the Commission has shown a degree of common cause with the British Government. It has expressed frustration, however, that many of the other member states do not share our commitment to poverty reduction as the overriding objective of development and aid. What does the right hon. Gentleman believe he can do, on the lines that he described, to persuade countries such as France, Germany and Italy to make a stronger commitment to poverty reduction, rather than using aid to tie to their own NGOs and to their own mercantilist interests?

Mr. Alexander: That is a valid point. I draw on my own experience as the former Europe Minister during the British presidency. During that time, and immediately preceding the British presidency, in the run-up to Gleneagles, members of the Government worked very hard indeed to secure widespread support, particularly among the A10, the newer members of the European Union, who for historical reasons were not as familiar with the cause of development in Africa, in particular, as some of the older members of the European Union, to secure genuine cross-European Union support, especially to double aid to Africa.

In many ways that seems a model of the work that we need to do. Of course we should work effectively with our European partners to secure a progressive trade policy, but I recognise that that often involves difficult conversations. I remember a particular debate in which I took part in the General Affairs Council when Peter Mandelson, the Trade Commissioner, was seeking a fresh mandate from the Council of Ministers in order to be able to negotiate on behalf of the European Union. At that meeting I was obliged to speak forcefully from the British seat against a proposal from the French Government that would have effectively bound the hands of the Trade Commissioner ahead of a critical stage in the negotiations.

The hon. Gentleman's experience as Chair of the Select Committee and his familiarity with European issues would, I hope, convince him, as those experiences convinced me, that in order to have influence with those European partners, we need to be inside the room exerting influence, rather than choosing to be outside the room deciding to launch a campaign or to protest.

In many poor countries, the aid about which I spoke earlier is a much needed catalyst for development, but in no country will aid be sufficient. As I am sure we all agree, economic growth is the surest path out of poverty, and trade is crucial to growth. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear his determination that the Government will

"align aid, debt relief and trade policies to wage an unremitting battle"

against poverty.

Delivering the promise of the Doha round remains our priority. We remain committed to finding a multilateral solution to the challenge that we face. The UK was instrumental in the launch of the round, and has kept it at the top of the international agenda ever since. Though the difficulties are real, the potential gains for the poor from a successful conclusion to the Doha round are huge. At the same time, we must also help developing countries to improve their ability to trade effectively. The investment climate facility for Africa, launched last year with $30 million of UK funding, uses the expertise of the private sector to help Africa become a better place in which to do business. The Government have therefore pledged to spend $750 million a year on aid for trade by 2010.

But the benefits of trade and growth for the poor can be realised only if we also tackle perhaps the greatest threat facing development, the challenge of climate change. Dealing with climate change is a clear priority for the Department for International Development. We are working across Government towards an international agreement on a cap and trade system which will reduce emissions and help developing countries on to a path of lower carbon growth by providing financial incentives.

The Department is also helping developing countries to preserve their vital ecosystems. Our contribution of £50 million to a new Congo rainforest conservation fund is intended to help prevent the double tragedy of

[Mr. Douglas Alexander]

that forest's deforestation, for 50 million people depend on it for their livelihood, and we all depend on it as a second lung of the world.

Yet international action on shared challenges such as climate change, securing growth or securing fair trade, requires effective international institutions. We accept that the international system today was created for the second half of the 20th century, not the first half of the 21st. That is why the report of the UN high level panel on system-wide coherence, in which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took part, is so important and points the way forward for the United Nations in the area of development. The UK has long pressed for UN reform, and I can assure the House that that will remain a priority for the Government.

When I met Bob Zoellick, the incoming president of the World Bank, the week before last, I underlined to him the importance that the Government attach to working with the World Bank as one of the key multilateral institutions.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In May last year the UK Government withheld £50 million from the World Bank because of concerns about conditionality in economic growth and aid. If presented with evidence of the World Bank embarking on such conditionality, would the Secretary of State consider doing that again?

Mr. Alexander: I hope it is a comfort to the hon. Gentleman that the broad issue of conditionality and the approach that the bank is taking was one of the issues that I had the opportunity to discuss in the earliest days of Bob Zoellick assuming his position within the bank. We have been clear that we are looking for a number of steps to be taken to ensure the requisite degree of transparency in the work that the bank does, and to ensure that the voices of developing countries are heard, perhaps more effectively than has been the case in the work of the World Bank in the past.

If I had to identify the challenge, I would say that it is to make sure that we have greater effectiveness of spend in-country. That often means devolving more decision making to country levels. In some ways I hope that the World Bank would take the kind of journey that has been taken by the Department for International Development in recent years, with a higher proportion of decisions now being taken within country. However, I would also want to ensure that the voices of developing countries are heard within the governing structures when those decisions are being taken. I was encouraged by the conversation that I had with Bob Zoellick on these matters. He is obviously reflecting on the challenges that he faces having come into the job only in the past month. I would expect that as we move towards the annual meetings later in the year we will have a clearer sense of the strategy under his presidency. I am optimistic that we will see some of the reforms that we have been urging upon him as we anticipate the International Development Association contribution later in the year.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that one of the surprising agreements following the UN summit was that the budget should be released only every six months, depending on UN reform. Would the Government support that approach? They have done it with the World Bank, so surely it would be appropriate to do it with the UN.

Mr. Alexander: I am rather wary of transferring specific methods of exerting influence from one institution to another. The nature of our relationship with the UN, as one of its very many members, albeit a member of the Security Council, is somewhat different from that of being a shareholder in the World Bank. However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are actively engaged in conversations about the need for reform of the UN system, particularly in terms of system-wide coherence, and about the broader need for reform within the World Bank, which we will continue to press for in the critical months ahead as Bob Zoellick gets his feet under the table and begins work. We will stay actively engaged with the World Bank and with other multilateral institutions, because that reflects the broader approach that we want to see. We do not want a relationship of patronage, so much as one of partnership with developing countries, and it is vital that multinational institutions reflect that in the work that they do.

Since 1997, the work of the Department for International Development has moved from the periphery of Government to the Cabinet table. We have gone a long way towards ensuring that Britain's contribution is no longer simply to provide the sticking plaster of old when crisis came, but to provide the building blocks for the poorest on earth to build a better future for themselves. Aid is a means by which we will alleviate poverty; development is how will end it. In our age, shaped as it is by the twin forces of globalisation and interconnectedness, to talk of one world is no longer to utter an abstract thought but to describe a concrete reality. In that one world, aid and development is not an act of charity but a vital investment in peace and prosperity, in equality and justice, in hope and humanity. If there is anything greater than the scale of the task that we face, it is the need for us to succeed. I commend our amendment to the House.

8.37 pm

Lynne Featherstone (Hornsey and Wood Green) (LD): When I first assumed my Front-Bench position and met all the non-governmental organisations and people who populate the world of international development, I formed the impression that the former Secretary of State for International Development walked on water—I am sure that the current one will follow—in as much as DFID has vast amounts of money to give out to a great number of countries and causes. However, as an Opposition party we need to establish whether, in terms of those billions that go to the developing world, we are spending our money well. Do we get bangs for our bucks? Is the funding delivering? Is it being spent in a way that addresses global poverty, not just in terms of the great humanitarian need of sustaining life, but in terms of moving from poverty and dependence to independence, which must ultimately be our aim?

This is a pretty consensual portfolio to have. I think that we would all agree that Make Poverty History was a phenomenal campaign whereby people across the developed world joined hands to put pressure on their Governments to make them give substantive promises at the G8 at Gleneagles. Great Britain can hold its head high in some respects. We provided £6.85 billion in aid last year—an increase from 0.47 to 0.52 per cent. of gross national income—although that is still some way short of the 0.7 per. cent. target. Other promises, particularly from other countries, remain undelivered. Indeed, the Africa Progress Panel, headed by Kofi Annan, claimed that the western world is only 10 per cent. of the way towards fulfilling its Gleneagles commitments. In 2006, for the first time in a decade, total aid from the west fell.

I welcome this debate. It is a timely reminder of the progress we have made and the challenges that remain, coming as it does at the mid-point between the setting of the millennium development goals and the 2015 deadlines. It is now becoming increasingly obvious that those goals will not be met—at least, not by many countries. Liberal Democrats are committed to a target of 0.7 per cent. of GNI by 2011 at the latest; it was a manifesto pledge. I was pleased to read the first recommendation of the Conservative review because it shows that they agree that the 0.7 per cent. target should be met sooner than 2013, although today's motion does not make that leap.

I want to address three key issues that are pre-eminent in the fight against global poverty: the nature of sustainable development, the tackling of corruption and climate change. If we do not make the tackling of those our priority, we shall fail in perpetuity to lift poor and vulnerable countries out of dependence, poverty and misery. As has been discussed already, we must remove unfair trade barriers against low-income countries. I hope that it is obvious that a key objective of international trade policies has to be to stimulate sustainable development, because no country has ever been lifted out of poverty by aid alone. An over-reliance on debt relief and aid leads to an unhealthy dependence, which creates a vicious circle that can be impossible to escape from.

As the Secretary of State said, it is vital that we reinvigorate the Doha talks to ensure a positive outcome for developing countries. We must reduce agricultural subsidies and trade barriers to guarantee a level playing field for all. The World Trade Organisation operates on a principle of one country, one vote, but we fail to give the poorest nations a voice in international trade negotiations.

It is easy to blame the international community for the desperately unjust situation we are in, but we also need to look a bit closer to home. The European Union's record on free trade is deplorable, despite our best efforts. I cannot help thinking that our real chance to push that issue home was when we had the presidency of the EU in 2005. We have to help developing countries to build up their economies and civil society so that they can move away from dependency. China and India have pulled huge portions of their populations out of poverty through economic growth, which has primarily been driven by international trade. We also have to realise that it is in our own interest to liberalise the trade agenda. Farming subsidies come out of the public purse; taxpayers' money is being diverted from where it is most needed in order to fill the pockets of a small but powerful minority.

Another part of the motion on global poverty mentions the need for

"independent accounting as well as increased independent scrutiny of the United Kingdom's aid budget".

We think that that is a very good idea, but corruption robs the aid budget of so much of its full value. We need to make sure that our money is delivering, and that the 10 per cent. take all the way along the line is stopped in its tracks.

Aid donors can take four direct actions to strengthen the hand of political leaders in developing countries that need help in reducing corruption, as well as some less direct measures. First, there is a need to tighten up procurement rules, in terms of the legal framework and the rules on the use of aid. Corruption can add 20 to 100 per cent. to the cost of our aid. Obviously, it is easier to tackle the rules than the legal framework—the World Bank, EU and Department for International Development rules have significant loopholes or latitude.

On another tack, as has been mentioned, there are lots of ways to trace the siphoning off of funds, but efforts at identifying the beneficiaries often appear half-hearted. The World Bank and others use specialists to trace funds. We can see how much Mobutu and Marcos money has been recovered after the fact. If Governments, including Her Majesty's Government, possess or can get such information about how and where money has been siphoned off, why do they not act? We must track down criminals and recover the money.

We also appear to lack the will to use international law and United Nations institutions. Many developing countries are now signatories to the UN convention that requires an anti-corruption institution. Yet many signatories barely comply with the letter or spirit of the convention in practice or in law. There is much scope for extra leverage by donors if they help such fledgling institutions become robust.

Even more problematic, much corruption in developing countries is legal. It ranges from the absence of a prohibition on Ministers owning companies that are recipients of hugely inflated contracts to permissiveness in capital markets, which enables Ministers, parliamentarians or officials to benefit directly from privatisations, bond issues and share acquisitions. That must change if we are to tackle corruption. We should be in there, helping strengthen anti-corruption measures with a review of a host of matters, from bribery to anti-competition laws; from insider trading to state governance.

We need to start from the bottom up. Donors should channel more funds through local government because that can strengthen vital local democracy. Much large-scale corruption occurs via singular central elites, and that leads to the so-called "necessity" of single tribes or ethnic groups grabbing control of the reins of central Government. One central target that holds all the power and wealth of a nation is a much greater danger than local government responding to local needs and demands.

[Lynne Featherstone]

Clearly, strengthening local governance and local democracy, and concentrating on the grass roots would cut corruption.

I have been able to cast only a brief glance over the weighty tome that is the Conservatives' policy review, which was launched today, but it contained little mention of local government and the importance of channelling funding, especially economic development, at the level of the company, the firm and the local market. If we are serious about strengthening countries through help to help themselves, local governance and local democracy is a must to defeat corruption. Simply monitoring and watching corruption and knowing that it exists is not enough.

A couple of months ago, Results UK arranged for me to meet a woman from Kenya called Lucy. She told me that, in Kenya, money from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria had been suspended because the Kenyan Government had failed to disburse the previous grants. It was only through grass-roots action and pressure from civil society groups such as hers that those blockages were removed—the Kenyan Government had to respond to the local demand for honesty. The Kenyan national TB programme could then continue its work.

Sadly, advising on the necessary steps to tackle corruption abroad seems a bit rich coming from us at the moment. We can tackle corruption only if we are squeaky clean in our dealings across the world. Now is not the best time for us to hold up our heads.

I want to consider an issue that hon. Members of all parties have acknowledged to be overwhelmingly important for the developing world: the threat of environmental degradation. I am upset that our amendment was not selected, but grateful that Labour and Conservative Members commended it.

Catastrophic climate change is not the only environmental problem but it is, clearly, the most urgent one, especially for poor countries, which are constrained in their ability to react to a rapidly changing climate. Climate change will hit the poorest and the most vulnerable countries in the developing world first. A recent WWF report demonstrated that, of all the millennium development goals, the goal on environmental sustainability—MDG 7—is the only one for which the overall position is getting worse rather than better.

Although the poorest people in the world have done least to cause climate change, they are the ones predicted to be worst affected. Poor people depend most directly on the services delivered by natural resources and ecosystems. They depend on them for food, fibre, water, fuel and income. The developed world, which is mostly responsible for climate change, should therefore help the developing world with adaptation. Applying the "polluter pays" principle, the developed world has an obligation to help poor and vulnerable countries to adapt to climate change. Therefore, we need in partnership to find additional funding for adaptation. The UK should perhaps take a lead on that, because we are one of those countries responsible for much of the pollution.

Judging from the Government's past performance, as well as from my first impressions of the Conservatives' report, I am not convinced that there is a real urgency about addressing the need for action. The Make Poverty History campaign was a brilliant example of civil society action to put pressure on the G8, but I wish that equal efforts had been made on the other G8 priority of that year—climate change. Uncontrolled climate change will undo all the good that debt forgiveness or higher aid can deliver. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) is no longer in his place, but it is good, as he said, that the G8 agreed to a UN-sponsored process on climate change.

However, there is in fact already a process: the Kyoto protocol, which involves all the key developing countries. If President Bush had been serious about wanting to involve the US in climate talks, all he needed to do was to ratify the Kyoto protocol and join the ongoing talks about targets for the second commitment period, post 2012. Developing countries also need to accept emissions reductions. Equally, however, we cannot expect them to do that unless the industrial countries move further and faster. That principle is written into the UN framework convention on climate change, which almost every country has ratified, including the US.

International institutions also need to adapt much more urgently to the new world of an increasingly unstable climate. The World Bank still does not pay enough attention to the issue and the International Monetary Fund almost none at all. Similarly, the World Trade Organisation treats environmental issues as an unimportant sideshow. It is notable that the environmental components of the Doha agenda have been all but abandoned. We must work for universal climate-proofing of development assistance if we are to ensure that climate change is mainstreamed in development programmes and initiatives. That is going to require co-ordination among the World Bank, the IMF and the OECD group of export credit agencies, to ensure that development objectives fully support climate change mitigation.

In conclusion, development will be impaired, reduced, slowed and diminished, and we will not get value for money if we continue to refuse to liberalise trade. Our spend must be delivered effectively, which means tackling corruption, not just saying that we are tackling it. The driving imperative of development, in all its incarnations, must become inseparable from the environmental cataclysm that is climate change.

8.53 pm

Hugh Bayley (City of York) (Lab): We are halfway between the year 2000, when the millennium development goals were set, and 2015, when the aim is for them to be implemented. This month the UN published its 2007 report on the millennium development goals, which records substantial but uneven progress. For instance, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty—on less than $1 a day—has fallen from a third of the world's population in 1990 to less than a fifth now. If that trend continues, that goal will be met globally at least, but not in every region of the world. A great deal of the progress that has been made is down to the economic growth of one particular country—the world's most populous country, China. China's per capita income in 1979 was $210; last year it was $1,750.

China is the world's workshop. Eighty per cent. of the world's photocopiers are produced there, as are 60 per cent. of its mobile phones and half of all its

computers and textiles. It is a sleeping giant that has woken up. Economically, it is doing well, although it still faces major development challenges relating to halting and reversing the HIV and AIDS infection rates, to gender inequality and to access to safe water and sanitation, on which its performance is on a par with some of the poorest countries in Africa. Inequality is rising extremely fast in China. It is a more unequal country than the United States of America. These are some of the problems that the Chinese communist party congress will address this autumn, and the National People's Congress—China's attempt at a Parliament—will discuss them when it is called together again in the spring of next year.

China's growth has profound implications for the global economy and for global development policy. By 2015, the target date for the millennium development goals, China could be a bigger economic partner for Africa than many of the OECD countries. On trade, for instance, China exported less than £1 billion worth of goods to Africa in 1995, yet by 2005, its exports to Africa were worth £11 billion—a twelvefold increase in just 10 years. In the same period, UK and French exports to Africa approximately doubled in value. In 1995, Africa exported £1.26 billion worth of goods to China, which was less than a third of what it exported to the United Kingdom. In 2005, it exported £8.9 billion worth of goods to China, nearly double its exports to the UK.

The two-way trade between China and Africa—the sum total of their imports and exports—was nearly £25 billion in 2006, and certainly by 2010 and possibly by next year it will reach roughly £50 billion. That is approximately the volume of EU trade with Africa. By 2015, China's trade with Africa will certainly dwarf the EU's trade with Africa.

It is hard to estimate the volume of China's aid to Africa. It is not a member of the OECD's development assistance committee, so it is difficult to compare like with like. Western donors distinguish between aid—official development assistance—and commercial investment, but a great deal of China's commercial investment comes from state banks or state-subsidised companies, so it is extremely difficult to make that distinction. At China's summit with African leaders last year, its president, Hu Jintao, pledged to double China's aid to Africa, although he did not specify what that would mean in cash terms. He did, however, announce credits and preferential loans to Africa with a value of US$5 billion.

Last year, China committed $8.1 billion of assistance to Angola, Nigeria and Mozambique. To put that in context, last year the World Bank committed some $2.3 billion in new loans to Africa, which is considerably less than the sum committed by China. Chinese aid is often criticised for being tied aid. It involves not only money spent in Chinese companies but includes Chinese labour that goes to Africa to deliver many of its construction projects. China's aid is often linked to its gaining access to natural resources, although, looking back over the years, one cannot say that UK aid or western aid in general has always avoided commercial advantages. Chinese aid is often made conditional on political goals—the One China policy, for instance. The declaration from the China-Africa summit at the end of last year committed all the African leaders present to supporting that policy as part of the deal.

Some Africans criticise China's aid policy. For example, the Kenyan "*Nation*" newspaper says:

> "China has an Africa policy, but Africa does not have a China policy... the danger is that China will politely rip off Africa just as the west did".

However, most African political leaders support what China is doing in Africa—and it is not just those of Sudan, Angola or other states who are in receipt of a lot of Chinese aid because of the raw materials they supply to China's economy. President Festus Mogae of Botswana—a country that most of us would regard as a model of African development and a success story—says:

> "The Chinese treat us as equals, the west treats us as subjects".

Mauritius is another African success story. Last week, it announced that it had secured $113 million in cheap Chinese grants and loans to develop its roads and telecommunications structures.

The Commission for Africa identified that western donors had neglected infrastructure. China has identified that, too, but it is moving a great deal faster than we are to provide infrastructure support to African countries. The Sierra Leonean ambassador to China, Sahr Johnny, said:

> "If a G8 country had wanted to rebuild the stadium, for example, we'd still be holding meetings. The Chinese just come and do it."

Other African leaders make similar comments about the nature of their relationship with China as a donor.

I believe that China's priorities for Africa are different from ours, but that it is genuinely committed to Africa's development. China would gain a great deal from working more closely with western donors. We are not in a position to dictate terms to China, but I would like to see DFID building a closer working relationship with the Chinese and inviting China to become an observer at OECD development assistance committee meetings.

A great deal of World Bank aid still goes to China. As the International Development Committee learned last week, a major loan package to help China to green its energy sector is being negotiated. I warmly welcome that, as China needs that kind of support. Since China has such enormous foreign exchange reserves, I do not think that the World Bank should be a net donor to China. We should invite the country, in view of the size of its foreign exchange reserves, to make a contribution to the next International Development Association replenishment equivalent to the size of the loans it receives from the World Bank and to become a donor, along with other World Bank nations.

With only nine seconds to go, I must quickly say that we should seek to plug the gaps that Chinese aid does not touch, such as on governance and supporting the capacity of Parliaments in Africa to hold the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order.

9.3 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for City of York (Hugh Bayley), who made a significant speech on

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

an extremely important subject. The issues that he raised are addressed in the report; indeed, he may well find matters of great interest to him there. I am thinking of a paper written by a brilliant young man of Chinese origin, who makes three succinct points. First, we should never miss the opportunity to engage with China on governance issues. Secondly, we should recognise that China will double its aid, so we—the G8—should keep our promises to double our aid. Thirdly, we and our partners should redouble our efforts and co-operate in pursuing governance issues to ensure that they are not undermined by other new donors coming on the scene.

I am indebted to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) both for securing the debate and for his masterly exegesis of a lengthy report. In delivering that, he has rather relieved me of the obligation that I had intended to fulfil of spelling out what it contains in its 453 pages. Therefore, perhaps I could address matters from a different angle from that which I intended.

I came to the subject of development many decades ago when, as my mother put it, I had a proper job and I was a development economist working on aid and development programmes in Africa and Asia. At that stage, had someone asked me whether I would still be interested in those subjects and whether we would still be facing so many of the same problems today—some of the countries that I have revisited face even worse levels of poverty than they did then—I would not have believed them. I thought that by now poverty would be history.

The situation was brought home to me clearly by someone who put it in stark terms. The aid effort began perhaps in 1948 with Harry Truman. Since then, $1 trillion has been spent on aid. Why is not poverty history? One reason is that that sum, although apparently large, is actually not so large spread over half a century and over billions of people. It is a handful of dollars for each poor person each year. Small wonder then that it has not cured the problem. There is every reason for us to increase aid, which I think the House is committed to do. My party, I am happy to see, is committed and has reaffirmed its intention to meet the 0.7 per cent. of GNI target by 2013, or earlier if possible.

Another reason is that, for much of that period, aid was given largely for reasons other than the alleviation of poverty. The cold war meant that aid was used to buy allegiance rather than to end poverty. Tied aid meant that money was given to subsidise donors' domestic industries, rather than to relieve poverty. Once one reaches that conclusion, that is a good reason to put much more emphasis on the effectiveness of aid, and that is what we do in the report to a considerable degree.

Although some of those problems have disappeared, for various reasons, ineffectiveness is still built into the governance of aid. Much attention is paid to the issue of governance within recipient countries but not enough to the issue of governance by donor countries. Tanzania has to give 2,400 reports in a single year to donors. It has to meet 1,000 or more delegations from donors. The pressure, weight and burden that is put on such countries by well meaning donors throughout the world is undoing the work that they are trying to achieve. That is why we put forward the proposal for partnership trusts to try to persuade as many donors as possible to give their money through a single channel, and to do so more effectively, efficiently and conveniently for the countries that we are helping through aid.

Another reason is that a lot of aid is top-down. We in this country recognise that the man in Whitehall does not know best how money should be spent in Swindon. Why do we think that he knows best how money should be spent in parts of Africa or Asia? Therefore, we propose that we should try to move to demand-led funding, and to harness the experience, expertise and knowledge of people in the countries that we want to help by saying, "Bring projects or programmes to us, be you Governments, local governments, companies, non-governmental organisations, or groups in the country." The demand-led fund will provide aid, subject to those projects being the best ways to achieve the ends that the groups put forward, and there being measures of performance and appropriate arrangements for auditing. We want that method to be tried. We hope and believe that it would work, expand and form a more significant part of the funding, or be used by partnership trusts themselves in handling funding for projects that they were carrying out in country.

A third response can be made to the statement that poverty is not history: for many people it is history. Millions of people do not experience poverty, disease or hunger because they and the countries in which they live have risen out of poverty as aid has worked. Aid has been successful in eradicating diseases—or at least eliminating them from large areas. Among such diseases are smallpox, polio, guinea worm disease and African river blindness.

One of the great successes in terms of hunger has been the green revolution in Asia. That is why we want there to be an extension of agricultural aid to produce a green revolution in the rain-fed and arid areas of Africa and Asia that were not touched by that first green revolution. We ought to make more of the successes in aid, and build on them. That is another of the report's themes.

The greatest successes have come about as a result of countries growing economically, and the great motor of such growth is trade. There have been great changes in opinion and a great mobilisation of support for increasing the aid effort and eliminating the burden of debt through campaigns such as Make Poverty History, Live 8 and drop the debt. We want a similar mobilisation of opinion through a campaign by all parties in this country and by all the countries of Europe and the developed world to create real trade opportunities for developing countries.

Susan Kramer (Richmond Park) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman and I went on the same trip to India, where we saw the slums of the textile manufacturers. What does his report say on corporate social responsibility, as we were often told on that trip that western buyers demanding the lowest price was the driver of the worst conditions?

Mr. Lilley: Actually, I recollect agreeing with the hon. Lady on those visits in that we were both struck by the fact that people who worked in what we might

describe as sweatshops said how delighted they were to have those jobs and how that had meant that their incomes had increased and their prospects had improved so that they could now send their children to school. Then, if not now, she and I agreed that we wanted more industrial development and growth and more companies competing for markets. We did not see that situation as simply showing that foreign companies needed to adopt different standards. Most of the companies concerned were domestic companies who were doing the best by their people and who would be unable to compete if unduly onerous obligations were put on them.

We want there to be a campaign for real trade. The Secretary of State did not engage with the main arguments, but instead made some rather strange points on Europe. He does not seem to realise that the person who chaired the campaign for real trade steering committee is Syed Kamall, a member of the International Trade Committee of the European Parliament. He will seek support across parties and across countries in an attempt to mobilise opinion.

I hope that everyone will respond in a manner in keeping with the spirit of the proposal, so that we generate passionate commitment to plans and calls to create opportunities for developing countries to participate and share in our markets, such as by unilaterally opening ours to them, by removing unnecessary and unintended restrictions such as those on rules of origin, by abolishing export subsidies, by helping to open up trade between neighbouring countries, and by putting greater emphasis on aid for trade to increase their export capacity. All those steps might receive cross-party support. I hope that they do so, and that they get support across the country, across Europe and across the world, and that we put a genuine pro-poor package at the heart of a revived Doha—or, if it does not revive, in its place.

9.14 pm

Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is always very interesting to follow the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). The Government have a good story to tell about their approach to tackling global poverty, and I wish to examine how that approach is being developed in Afghanistan, because that has some interesting lessons for us. I remind the House of the atrocious poverty in Afghanistan. More than half the population live on less than $1 a day, one in four Afghan children die before their fifth birthday and 30 per cent. of rural Afghans are partly malnourished. Of course, the situation has been exacerbated by 27 years of war.

What is crucial is that the people of Afghanistan want their country to improve. It is also important that we do not see the situation as overwhelming. That is why the approach that has been adopted by the Government is so helpful, and they are leading the way for other countries. The Government have signed a 10-year development partnership with the Government of Afghanistan and that has brought together their shared commitments to reduce poverty and meet the millennium development goals; to respect human rights and other international obligations; and to strengthen the financial management and accountability of money that is donated, which is directly relevant to the Opposition's motion. Specifically, DFID has given itself the challenge of supporting the delivery of the Afghan national development strategy, which seeks not only to tackle poverty, but to develop the economy of the country. DFID is also providing development assistance by working with other partners to alleviate poverty and promote development.

DFID has made a three-year rolling commitment, from 2006 to 2009, delivering £330 million of development aid. It has said that that assistance will continue until 2015-16. That is really important, because we need to make a long-term commitment to those countries with huge problems. Tackling poverty and putting systems for development in place do not happen overnight, especially when one starts from the low base in Afghanistan.

At the moment, some 80 per cent. of aid from Britain is being directed through the Government of Afghanistan. That causes some issues for NGOs, who would prefer more of the money to go to them. Work to address that issue is being undertaken through DFID and its partner agencies in Afghanistan, to involve NGOs in the delivery of services, so that they are able to receive money indirectly through the Government of Afghanistan. That approach is still in the early stages of formulation and we may need to consider how effective it is in the future. DFID has said that it is keeping the 80 per cent. figure under review, and that is important.

The level of aid provided is of course critical, and we should note that the UK is the largest donor to the Government of Afghanistan's recurrent budget, but it is very important—as expressed in the Government's amendment—that we consider the outcomes. It is important to work with other countries and to ensure that delivery is achieved on the ground. Indeed, there is evidence of that in Afghanistan, in the development not only of new towns but also of basic infrastructure.

DFID is making progress. Due to DFID's work with the Afghan Government and other partners, more than 5 million children are in school—up from 45,000 in 1993. A large number of refugees have returned to Afghanistan. Forty thousand fewer babies die, mostly because of vaccination programmes supported in part by DFID. The number of functioning health clinics has increased by 60 per cent. The proportion of women receiving antenatal care has also increased, from 5 per cent. in 2003 to 30 per cent. in 2006.

The economy has grown by 8 per cent. and it is certainly hoped that growth will continue this year. An important aspect of support is that given to microfinance, which supports small farmers and women in cottage industries and helps to build up the economic base. Microfinance is being adopted by the Government and others to support development through the economy.

Since 2001, DFID has spent more than £490 million on reconstruction and development, and a large proportion of that money is now going through the Afghan Government. With reference to the point made by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), it is important that some of the money is being devolved to the municipalities, such as Kandahar. We are used to thinking of Afghanistan in terms of security, which is obviously important; our armed forces are in the country and we must never forget the security concerns, but development is taking

[Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods]

place, too. In Kandahar, people have been able to build roads; there are housing projects, six parks and a new industrial park, which supports 70 factories where the number of work opportunities is growing.

The evaluation carried out by the Afghan Government found that such projects were exactly what they should be doing. Supporting such factories in the municipalities makes it possible to reduce poverty and increase security; if people have jobs they will have less interest in participating in illegal activities that are harmful and detrimental to the community's security and progress. We can see a direct link: aid goes to the Afghan Government and then to the municipality where it creates jobs for people on the ground, which is obviously what we want.

There are of course still incredible challenges and it would be wrong to suggest that we have got there with Afghanistan. That is clearly not the case. However, the way in which the Government have put the money in—working through the Afghan Government, trying to give them advice and support to make their systems more accountable, as well as working with other aid agencies—provides a useful model. There are still issues with regard to co-ordination and there is clearly a role for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The security situation needs to be stabilised so that more development can take place.

The institutions of civil society need to be developed, and the Afghan Government are interested in working with us to deliver a stronger civil society. Obviously, the aid process needs to be inclusive so that local people feel that they have some say over how the money is spent in their local communities. That is happening increasingly in Afghanistan, and it is an example of Britain leading the way in tackling global poverty through economic development and—crucially—sustainable development.

9.24 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) and his colleagues on an excellent report. I think we have all come to international development wanting to see the eradication of poverty, and to that extent the starting point for us all has been the millennium development goals, but even since the Commission for Africa three new matters have emerged. The first has been the rise of China. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for City of York (Hugh Bayley) and I would not wish to add anything to what he said. He described that position extremely well. We must all take note of the rise of China, both as a country that is going to take its people out of poverty and which we should therefore help to meet the millennium goals, and for the contributions that it is making to Africa.

Secondly, I agree with the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods) that, sadly, the relationship between security and development, which we are witnessing in Afghanistan, will be one of the increasing complexities for DFID and conflict resolution as we move through the 21st century.

Thirdly, as the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone) said, so many policies will now need to be regional strategic policies, on such issues as climate change. Those of us who have visited Darfur and Chad have had cause to wonder how much of that situation has been an ethnic problem and how much has been a climate problem in terms of the loss of pastoral land. These new issues are emerging and making life more complicated, but poverty has focused the minds of both donors and recipients.

There are things that we need to do to move on. First, we need to ensure that countries keep up to the mark on the amount of aid giving and the 0.7 commitment. In the report, the idea of a global donor index is very impressive because actually many of the commitments that were made at Gleneagles have not been met, as the sums of the German presidency demonstrated. We also need to ensure that there is greater aid effectiveness. This evening we have heard of a number of instances of developing countries having to cope with a huge number of donors, and therefore the idea of partnership trusts makes a lot of sense. I think that hon. Members from all parts of the House will realise that when they look at this proposal.

But one of the most important points in the report is this. Wherever the International Development Committee goes in aspiration, one question that it asks itself is, "Where will the jobs come from?" It is for that reason that trade, and ensuring the success of the Doha round or a replacement for it, are crucial. I hope that hon. Friends will have the opportunity to look at the detail of the proposals for a real trade campaign, because ensuring that there is momentum on trade will be really crucial for developing countries in the coming years. We are all anxious to allow every colleague a chance to speak, so time does not enable me to develop that theme, but before anyone seeks to knock the report, I simply ask them to read the proposals on trade; they are compelling.

Lastly, I am at a loss to see the difference between the motion on the Order Paper tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) and the Government's amendment. There seems to be no difference at all. This is an issue where Members on all sides of the House should be trying to reach the greatest agreement. I agree with the Secretary of State; I was campaigning for Europe quite a long time ago, and we need to have a united voice as a House and as a country if we are to have real influence in the European Union and elsewhere in the world.

9.28 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): As the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) said, this debate reflects the fact that when we contrast our expectations for progress on world poverty and experience, it becomes clear that progress does not roll along on the wheels of inevitability. We need concerted efforts; we need to make real commitments and follow through on those real commitments; and we need to recognise that setting targets is very good but delivering targets is even better. We also need to recognise that partnership must be the ethic that runs through all our aid efforts. The Government have established a firm credential for partnership, unlike other countries that

still have a strong element of patronage permeating their aid policies and programmes, but none of us can be smug about such things.

I will not rehearse the points that other hon. Members have made about the challenges that we face, but one of the issues that we perhaps need to consider as we tackle poverty and the different challenges is, of course, the complexity that arises in the context of conflict. In particular, we need to ensure that our approaches to aid and trade and our work in and with developing countries take account of the difficulties, tensions and pressures that can arise.

I suggest that, just as in many ways the EU as a model of conflict resolution has found itself with a strong capacity to engage in certain theatres in the world, there is another dimension that we need to think about: the historic conflict resolution that we have achieved on these islands between a large country and a small country. We have a history of colonisation within these islands. We have a history of famine in Ireland, and so on. In the current context, Britain and Ireland working together in some areas would bring an added benefit and purpose.

I hope that Ministers here and Ministers elsewhere will perhaps consider that one of the things that we might spin off in the context of the British-Irish Council is a framework whereby our development co-operation effort can properly include and involve the various devolved Administrations in these regions, who are seeking to have an input into development policy. The Scottish Executive have developed a programme in relation to Malawi. There are efforts in Wales, and many of us in Northern Ireland are part of an all-party group that is looking at something similar. But rather than us all engaging in karaoke versions of our own DFID, I believe that between the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin and the excellent work of Co-operation Ireland and the very good work of DFID, those Administrations and, indeed, local government more widely might be better engaged in more fruitful development co-operation in terms of partnerships.

With the emphasis that so many hon. Members have put on governance, administration, transparency and programme delivery, much can be given in that regard. I am certainly reinforced in that view by my experience in a devolved Administration of some of the challenges that we faced as we dealt with the models of governance that worked for us. Indeed, people elsewhere in the EU accession countries came to Ireland, north and south, to learn how we handled EU programmes, the transparency and governance issues and the various partnership questions with stakeholders. Many lessons can be applied in that respect. That is not to set aside any of the other very important points, but I wanted to confine myself to adding an additional aspect that might be missing from some other contributions.

9.33 pm

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan). The debate was opened by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) with that combination of intellect, erudition and courtesy that are his defining characteristics and that command the respect of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

There is no doubt that the fact that more than 1 billion people in the developing world exist—I will not say live—on less than a $1 a day is a scar on the face of humanity that disfigures and in a very real sense diminishes every single one of us. In seeking to tackle that appalling human tragedy and to offer hope for the future, there are three points that at this stage in our proceedings and in our national deliberations we need keenly and authoritatively to address.

First, if we believe in more aid—we do in each of our respective parties; I have argued for it from the Front and Back Benches, throughout the last Parliament—we must recognise that there is at least as important a duty on us to recognise and fight against corruption. Indeed, I would argue to the Secretary of State in a non-partisan spirit that that obligation is more important at the time of a rising aid budget.

Of course we want more transparency, accountability, scrutiny, support for Parliaments, exposure of wrongdoing and appropriate punishments. We also have a duty to recognise that corruption must be fought wherever it rears its ugly head, whether it is in the practice of recipient Governments or the behaviour of corporate entities. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) is to be warmly congratulated on the suggestion that we work towards the formulation of an EU common code on this subject, to which individual countries and perhaps businesses would sign up. We should give real teeth to our commitment to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention on bribery by translating its essence, spirit and provisions into domestic legislation. That has not happened and it is overdue. There is a compelling case for it and there is now an opportunity for it to happen. I hope very much that it will.

My second point is that, notwithstanding the efficacy of, and the case for, increased aid, there is a real opportunity to improve economic development and a demand for that. That requires a new focus on, and commitment to, infrastructure in two forms: commercial and physical. I emphasise commercial infrastructure. We should seek to foster the creation of what I would call the institutional infrastructure of competitive capitalism in the developing world. That means the creation of clear systems of property rights; a recognition of the concept of credit; transparent, simplified and intelligible taxation systems; the enforceability of contracts; and courts through which we can give effect to that principle.

Physical infrastructure is important too. Okay, the past was disappointing. There were failures. Mistakes occurred under successive Governments. Prestige projects went wrong. Too much money was spent and it was very badly accounted for. Scandals resulted. But that does not in any sense reduce—still less obviate—the responsibility upon us now to go forward seeing the merits of decent infrastructure. Without decent roads, decent rail, decent transport and decent communication systems, the aspiration to economic improvement, to individual fulfilment, to national development in the developing world remains just that: an idle aspiration. So, yes, we need to have economic development. That must be a prime objective of British, European, and multilateral aid policy.

[John Bercow]

Finally, we must have a massive expansion of trade, because the catalyst that it provides for economic development is potentially enormous. There is a compelling argument for unilateral initiatives, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden has so rightly proposed, and, yes, it is about the removal of trade barriers and the elimination of trade-distorting subsidies. It is also about doing what we give the impression that we intend to do. We must mean what we say and say what we mean.

I give the example of duty-free and quota-free access. I say to the Secretary of State that it is no good international leaders saying that 97 per cent. of tariff lines will be of benefit to the developing world because there will be duty-free and quota-free access, if the more than 300 individual product lines—the 3 per cent.—that are of most importance to the countries, and offer the most potential benefit, do not form part of the equation. Bangladesh has to be able to export its textiles to the United States, and other countries that specialise in footwear, or, for that matter, fish or leather products, have to be able to sell those products.

It is time that the developed world ceased its nauseating hypocrisy of preaching free markets while practising protectionism on a truly industrial and breathtaking scale. As a consequence of the failures of multilateral policy and a lack of imagination, too many people in the developing world have suffered too much for too long with too little done to help them. That situation must change, and it will better change with cross-party support in the House and multilateral backing in the international community.

9.38 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): It is a privilege to sum up this debate and to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) for his seminal work entitled "In it together: the attack on global poverty". That is an apt title and a good place to start. There have been some excellent speeches from the hon. Members for City of York (Hugh Bayley), for Foyle (Mark Durkan), and for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods), but I am going to concentrate on the speeches made by my right hon. Friends the Members for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and for Hitchin and Harpenden, and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry), and on the excellent speech made just now by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow). As always, he was erudite, concise, and said a great deal in the time available to him.

A consensus is developing across the House about what we need to achieve with the UK aid effort. I used to be chairman of the all-party population and reproductive health group, and long ago there was a campaign to achieve the target of having 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product given in aid. At long last, the consensus in the House is that we should move towards that target, and one of the very few monetary pledges made by my party is that we should achieve it by the year 2013. Incidentally, that would mean that DFID's current budget of £5.9 billion would rise to £8.6 billion by that date.

When the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), winds up the debate, I hope that he will deal with some of the very serious proposals in this report. We need to use aid money more effectively to lift out of poverty the more than 1 billion who live on less than $1 a day—something that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham rightly called a scandal. We must all work to that end, and neither the Opposition nor the Government have a monopoly of wisdom about how that can be done. I hope that the Minister will not spend his entire speech trumpeting the Government's marvellous success at achieving that.

It is critical that aid is effective. To ensure that it is, we must concentrate on what people in recipient countries want. As my hon. Friends have said, that means that we should concentrate on outcomes rather than inputs. Above all, our policy should be intelligible, and easy to operate in the countries for which it is intended.

I remember having a conversation with the UN ambassador to Sierra Leone, in which he told me about what happened after the election there. We all know that there was a huge campaign and a civil war before the British Government eventually succeeded in getting that country to move towards democracy, but three days after the election the UN agencies wanted to know what the new Government's next 10-year plan was. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden says, we must stop bombarding countries like that with requests and targets—and he used the very good example of Tanzania being required to produce 2,400 reports.

In the short time available, I want to concentrate on the effectiveness of our aid. As the report proposes, it can be delivered in a simpler way, through partnerships that involve various international donors and Governments acting on a multilateral basis. In that way, we can offer an aid package to countries that is much simpler to operate.

The hon. Member for City of Durham drew on the experience that she and I gained on our visit to Afghanistan. There, as she will recall, we found that most European Governments give their aid directly to the Government, in a deliberate attempt to bolster that Government's capacity. Sadly, we also found that the US—whose aid budget, estimated at £9 billion this coming year, is by far the biggest—gives most of its aid unilaterally, through USAID. That has caused much confusion, and it would be much better if all donors were to operate in concert.

I want to press the Minister a little to find out how he sees our part of the EU aid package operating. Does he agree that it should be on a unilateral basis, so that the EU can offer concessions to the poor donor countries? Those concessions could take the form of reducing tariff barriers and obstacles to trade, although we should not expect the poor donor countries to introduce similar cuts themselves, as to do so could leave them devastated. I hope that the Minister will say something about that.

The second part of the report sets out how trade should encourage growth. Ultimately, it is only through growth that most countries will be lifted out of poverty. Vietnam offers a good example of that. After the war, it was poorer than most African countries, but today it

has a flourishing economic base and is about to apply to join the World Trade Organisation—a real success story.

With effective aid, there is no reason why many African countries should not be able to do exactly the same thing. It was a great sadness to the Opposition that the Government were not able to complete the WTO's Doha round. There is no doubt about it: a successful WTO round will put billions of pounds into developing countries' pockets, so it is one of the most effective ways of lifting countries out of poverty. I hope that, even now, the Government will put every effort into trying to persuade our EU partners to complete the Doha round successfully.

If aid is to be delivered successfully, it must be seen to be properly scrutinised, and I welcome the proposals for independent scrutiny in the report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden. In particular, I welcome the suggestion that Parliament should debate our proposals on partnerships. It is through debate, scrutiny and proper publication of the goals and aims of each donor project that we can deliver aid more effectively.

I agree with the Liberal amendment to the motion. Eliminating or reducing climate change is critical, just as aid is, because if we do not try to reduce climate change, we cannot hand on a better world to our children and grandchildren, and I came into politics to do just that. If each and every one of us makes a little bit of difference to the world and passes it on in a better state than we found it, we will have achieved something in our political careers.

9.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): I welcome the debate, which provided the House with a further important opportunity to consider what further steps the international community can take to make progress in the fight against global poverty. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said, given that more than a billion people live on less than a dollar a day, we in the developed world have a particular responsibility to help to tackle that poverty.

Our aid is already having an important impact. Over 10 million more children in India are in school as a result of aid that we have provided over the past three years. There are some 700 more nurses in Malawi, and the number of people who have access to antiretrovirals in southern Africa has more than trebled in recent years as a direct result of our aid. Under the former Prime Minister, and indeed the current Prime Minister, our leadership across the world, and within the European Union and the G8 in particular, has resulted in a debt relief deal worth up to $55 billion for the poorest countries of the world. Aid levels are rising, too, but clearly more needs to be done in some countries in the European Union. Our aid has trebled since 1997, and we are the first Government in the nation's history to set a timetable for reaching the UN's 0.7 per cent. goal.

We will continue to champion a Doha round of world talks that is genuinely in the interests of developing countries, as hon. Members have asked us to. We will also champion economic partnership agreements that genuinely offer hope to our friends in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, and new trading opportunities on fair terms with the prospect of new jobs to come. We will also champion an "aid for trade" package of support that genuinely helps countries to exploit the market access offers that such talks will eventually secure. We recognise that there is more to do, and the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) gave one important example of the challenges that we face in the negotiations.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Hugh Bayley) was right to highlight the new role that China plays as a donor, particularly in Africa. He rightly highlighted the importance of engagement with China on that activity—a point echoed by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). I am sure that both Members will be reassured to hear that we are indeed engaging with the Chinese. We are meeting delegations in the UK and in Beijing to discuss how aid resources are spent and climate change, a common challenge for us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) raised the important issue of continuing to work in countries that have been devastated by conflict. He will know of the particular importance that we attach to helping fragile states. He may know, too, of the recent visit that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made to Darfur to continue to explore what we can do to help address the terrible situation in that country.

The tragedy of the report is its timing. It is 20 years too late. Twenty years ago it would have been radical. The views on trade would have been particularly revolutionary. We can ask how many fewer children would be out of school now, how many extra nurses would be helping to fight HIV/AIDS in southern Africa, and how many extra miles of roads and metres of water pipes would have been laid, had the report been published 20 years ago. Instead, we saw the Conservatives continuing to cut the amount of aid available to be spent on development in poor countries.

I say gently and with sadness that we on the Government Benches will find it difficult to take seriously the pledge on 0.7 per cent., when at the first sign of pressure from the right wing of the Conservative party, the Leader of the Opposition caves in. Can we have any confidence that the Opposition will be able to resist the temptation to raid the development budget to find tax cuts for the few and appeal again to the party's right wing?

John Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Thomas: The right hon. Member for West Dorset was right to say that aid from one country will not make enough difference fast enough. It is also true that the right policies on debt relief from one country will not make enough difference fast enough.

John Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Hon. Members: Give way!

Mr. Thomas: It is true, too, that the right policies on trade on the part of one country will not make enough

[Mr. Thomas]

difference fast enough. A collective international effort is required, but as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly pointed out, the Opposition do not have the record or the credibility with other leaders and parliamentarians in Europe and beyond to put that international coalition together.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Thomas: The Opposition are isolated in Europe—

Hon. Members: Give way!

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister does not seem to want to give way. [HON. MEMBERS: "He should give way."] Whether he should or not, he does not want to give way.

Mr. Thomas: The truth is that the Conservatives cannot come to terms with the fact that they are isolated in Europe, isolated in the international community, and isolated on their own Front Bench. They lack the ability to give international leadership on the issue. To be advised by the Opposition about spending aid money well has shades of King Herod advising on child care. They, after all, were responsible for the worst misuse of development assistance that our country has seen—the Pergau dam affair.

I turn to the comments of the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone). She rightly raised the issue of corruption and governance. She will know of the considerable effort that we have made to help countries put in place the robust financial systems that they need to ensure that our aid money, and their own tax revenues, are well spent. She will know, too, that on occasion we have withheld aid from countries which we did not think had made enough progress in putting such financial systems in place.

On governance, we know that charity is not enough. The point did not seem to have been properly grasped in the report. NGOs have a crucial role to play, but on their own they are not enough. In the end, it is Governments whom we must help—not Governments in Sudan, of course, or in Zimbabwe, and certainly not in Burma, but yes, Governments in Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, in Rwanda definitely, India, Afghanistan, Tanzania and Botswana. We must help Governments so that they can help their people. In the end it is Governments who have to create health services for all their people, build an effective civil service, and put in place the mechanisms to ensure that their countries have a strong Parliament, free media and a vibrant civil society. It is Governments who can create the economic stability necessary for the private sector to thrive.

John Bercow: I thank the Minister for giving way. If the consequence of a trade deadlock is to cause the poorest countries in the world to lose $5,000 million a month, does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is merit in trying to persuade the European Union unilaterally to abandon its trade protectionism?

Mr. Thomas: I entirely agree that we need to do a considerable amount more to persuade our colleagues in the European Union to make additional concessions. However, we also need to use our leverage in the Doha round of negotiations to ensure that our allies across the Atlantic give way, particularly on cotton subsidies and on trade-distorting domestic support. Similarly, we need to use our leverage as the European Union to ensure that other developed nations give way and offer up better access for developing countries. I simply do not see how the hon. Gentleman thinks that his party would be able to have that influence with European Union allies when it does not have the relationship with the other political parties that are necessary to give leverage.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Until the Minister's speech, there was a great deal of unanimous agreement across the House, which is much more effective than the rather partisan way in which he is handling the debate at the moment.

Mr. Thomas: I would be negating my responsibility to the House if I did not point out the Conservatives' dismal record on these issues and the weaknesses in the report that they have published. I simply offer these comments in a spirit of helpfulness and friendliness, and a little in the spirit of sadness towards the hon. Gentleman. I have no doubt that if my speech and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State are carefully scrutinised, they will help to improve the quality of the continuing debate in the Conservative party.

Good governance is the reason South Korea is developing and North Korea is not developing. It is the reason Botswana, despite all its problems, makes progress and Zimbabwe, tragically, as the House debated only last week, goes backwards.

We have achieved a lot over the past 10 years. As I said, our aid budget has trebled. We are making a difference through the way in which our aid is spent. We are helping to ensure that more children in Ethiopia and Ghana are in primary school. We still face huge challenges in terms of the numbers of children—more than 70 million—who are out of school. Those children are denied the most basic opportunities of all—to learn and to read and write, and to have a teacher open their minds to the world beyond the walls within which they live.

There is an awful lot more to do. We are continuing to work with colleagues across the European Union to encourage them to raise their aid, to deliver on the debt relief commitment that they have made, and make progress on the international trade talks—the Doha round and the economic partnerships agreements that Members on both sides of the House recognise are so crucial if we are to achieve in developing countries the routes out of poverty and to economic stability and growth. That is why I was in Brussels yesterday at a meeting of Trade Ministers, where I made the case for more liberal and simplified rules of origin and for the Commission to make a more generous offer in the Doha round. I suspect that in time a more generous offer will also be needed on economic partnerships agreements. I am sure that the House will be pleased to hear that many Trade Ministers expressed considerable

support for that point of view. Although the G4 talks at Potsdam were not as positive as we would have liked, the gaps have narrowed considerably.

However, there is more work to do. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already spent a considerable amount of time and effort in talking to President Bush and to key figures in Brazil and other parts of the developing world who are engaged in these talks. He has been talking to Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, and to others in the European Union, looking to galvanise new momentum into the talks—

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 207, Noes 302.

Division No. 198] [9.59 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hayes, Mr. John
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Johnson, Mr. Boris
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Main, Anne
Maples, Mr. John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Thurso, John
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeremy Wright and
Mr. Stewart Jackson

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia

Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Keith
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David

Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Sadiq Khan and
Liz Blackman

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House acknowledges the Government's global leadership on international development; welcomes the Government's stated objective to increase the aid budget to 0.7 per cent. of gross national income by 2013; further welcomes the widespread support which this policy has secured; further acknowledges the centrality of effectively delivered aid to low income countries' sustainable economic development; welcomes the Government's untying of aid; supports the United Kingdom Government's moves to establish an independent evaluation mechanism and its increased focus on aid effectiveness, results and impact; and acknowledges that the UK Government is working at the multilateral and bilateral levels to remove the trade barriers which developing countries face and to help them take advantage of new market opportunities through the provision of aid for trade.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees),

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Asylum (Designated States) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 22nd May, be approved.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

Mr. Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 25 July, pursuant to Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees),

SECURITY INDUSTRY

That the draft Private Security Industry Act 2001 (Amendments to Schedule 2) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 7th June, be approved.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees),

COMPANIES

That the draft Companies Act 2006 (Commencement No. 3, Consequential Amendments, Transitional Provisions and Savings) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 9th July, be approved.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees),

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

That the draft Children Act 2004 Information Database (England) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 4th July, be approved.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

Mr. Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 25 July, pursuant to Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions).

REGULATORY REFORM

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1) (Consideration of draft regulatory reform orders),

DEER

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Deer) (England and Wales) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 5th July, be approved. —*[Mr. Khan.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

SOIL PROTECTION

That this House takes note of European Union Documents Nos. 13401/06 and Addenda 1 and 2, Commission Communication Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection, and 13388/06, Draft Directive establishing a framework for the protection of soil and amending Directive 2004/35/EC; and supports the Government's aim of ensuring that any new EU obligations in respect of the protection of soils and their functions are evidence-based, proportionate and cost effective and take full account of the principles of subsidiarity and better regulation, particularly in respect of Member States' existing national legislation.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 25th July—

(1) the Speaker shall put the Questions on:

(a) the Motion in the name of Ms Harriet Harman relating to Standing Orders Etc. Machinery of Government Changes); and

(b) the Motion in the name of Mr Nicholas Brown relating to the Modernisation of the House

not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved, proceedings may continue, though opposed after the moment of interruption and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) proceedings on the Motion for the adjournment of the House in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the draft legislative programme may continue, though opposed, for three hours or until Seven o'clock, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.——*[Mr. Khan.]*

PETITIONS

Inland Waterways

10.17 pm

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): I have pleasure in presenting a petition on behalf of the constituents of Banbury and other users of Britain's inland waterways. The petition, signed by well over 1,000 of my constituents, declares:

That our inland waterways are a unique national asset that provides an important contribution to the quality of life for millions of our citizens. We therefore are deeply concerned that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has seen fit to reduce British Waterways' grant by some £60 million over the next five years and that of the Environment Agency by £25 million in this financial year. We believe that these cuts will have a devastating effect on the well-being of inland waterways.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call upon the Government to introduce legislation to solve the immediate problems caused by these cuts to current budgets and to ensure that long-term funding is guaranteed to enable continued investment and restoration of the waterways.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Derwent Valley

10.18 pm

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): For the past three years, people in the north-east of England have faced yet another attempt by open-cast coal developers to exploit and rape the beautiful Derwent valley. Despite the opposition of the local authority and in defiance of the views of thousands of local people and a multitude of public and private bodies, the developers have gone to appeal. In that process, they have continually failed to disclose the appropriate information to all concerned, and persisted with a plan that has given the residents of the area grave cause for concern.

This petition, signed by more than 4,500 people, is a public declaration of their opposition to those plans, and I urge the Secretary of State to use all her powers to protect one of the last remaining green spaces in the Tyneside conurbation.

To lie upon the Table.

Inland Waterways

10.19 pm

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): I wish to present a petition with more than 600 signatures of constituents of Leicester, South and other users of Britain's inland waterways. It expresses widespread concern about the future of those waterways—a concern that I share. I commend all involved in this campaign, particularly Mr. David Stevenson and, of course, the indefatigable Inland Waterways Association. The petitioners declare

That our inland waterways are a unique national asset that provides an important contribution to the quality of life for millions of our citizens. We therefore are deeply concerned that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has seen fit to reduce British Waterways' grant by some £60 million over the next 5 years and that of the Environment Agency is having its budget reduced by £25 million... We believe that these cuts will have a devastating effect upon the well-being of inland waterways.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call upon the Government to introduce legislation to solve the immediate problems caused by these cuts to current budgets and to ensure that long-term funding is guaranteed to enable continued investment and restoration of the waterways.

And the petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Elvet Waterside

10.21 pm

Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): This rather beautiful petition relates to the proposed development at Elvet waterside in Durham and expresses the opposition of local residents to the loss of green recreational space. Interestingly, it includes signatories from local schools whose children are very anxious that play facilities are retained. The land in question relates to green space east of the swimming bath car park's wall, including the former bowling green on the old racecourse on the river bank in Durham city.

Mr. Jack Gill and 3,300 signatories are involved in the petition:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Communities and Local Government to do all to protect and retain this public space for the present citizens of the City of Durham, future residents and posterity and visitors.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Prison Service (Staff Relocation)

10.22 pm

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The proposed closure of Her Majesty's Prison Service office at Crown house in Corby and the relocation of its staff to Leicester have caused much consternation, anger and anxiety among staff and local residents. It is, in my view, discriminatory against the largely female and white work force. I have the honour to present this petition, signed by 3,560 people:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled.

The humble petition of Mrs.Vicki Tomlin and others of like disposition listed below

Sheweth

That the proposed relocation of Prison Service staff from Crown House, Corby to Leicester should be stopped.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House calls upon Her Majesty's Government to urge the Ministry of Justice to consider the plight of Mrs Vicki Tomlin and others who work at Crown House and stop the relocation.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Pedestrian Crossing (Western Road)

10.23 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Romford, many of whom shop in the town centre. A number of constituents use the local Western road life skills centre and they need a pedestrian crossing—a safe way to cross the busy road to enable them to go to the town centre without fear of being run down. A petition has been collected signed by no fewer than 500 local people from Romford. The petition reads:

To the House of Commons,

The Petition of residents of the Borough of Havering and others

Declares the petitioners' serious concerns over the refusal by both Havering Borough Council and Transport for London to take responsibility for the need to establish a pedestrian crossing on Western Road, an especially busy section of highway within the constituency of Romford. The petitioners are further concerned that the lack of a pedestrian crossing is having a huge impact on the surrounding community, with people of all ages and disabilities, who are experiencing great difficulty in crossing the road and negotiating the large amounts of traffic synonymous with this stretch of road.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Transport to use her powers to intervene and clarify which party is responsible for the establishment of a crossing on Western Road and then urge that party to install a crossing or other form of traffic calming measure, so as to allow people to cross freely and safely.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Post Office Closures

10.25 pm

Andrew Rosindell: I rise again to present a petition of no fewer than 800 signatures collected by users of the Rush Green post office in my constituency of Romford. Those constituents, along with many others, are deeply concerned at the possibility of the closure of the post office and others in my constituency, including the Station Road post office, the Crowlands post office, North Street post office, Gobions post office, Victoria Road post office and the Brentwood Road post office. They are also concerned at the Government's policy to end support for the Post Office card account and hope that that policy will be reversed and that the service will be saved.

The petitioners have submitted the petition to me, which

Declares that the petitioners believe that the post office network provides a vital service to local communities in both urban and rural areas. The petitioners are concerned that the threatened withdrawal of services from local post offices, by the Government, will seriously affect the governance and more specifically, efficiency of the postal network, as well as damaging community cohesion around these post offices, which in many cases acts as a central and focal point for local community interaction.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform to reverse its announcement to end support for the Post Office Card Account 2010 thereby threatening the viability of thousands of post offices and further urges it to immediately halt its activities designed to kill off the account, and Post Office services in the Romford constituency,

And the Petitioners remain.

To lie upon the Table.

Inland Waterways

10.27 pm

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The canals have long been a major player in regenerating local economies, restoring environments and sustaining the quality of community life, and nowhere more so than in north-west Leicestershire, where many are alarmed at the cuts in the British Waterways budget and their potential impact. I am very happy therefore to present this petition after a beautiful day in London, which stands in stark contrast to the wet miserable day in Leicester, with the rain slatting down on 4 March, when I helped to launch it with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby).

The petition signatories include David Stevenson, who has worked astonishingly hard with others to compile it, Janet Stevenson of 6 Heathfield, Thringstone Leicestershire LE67 8LU, and myself as the local Member of Parliament and a regular user of the facilities of the Ashby canal in my constituency.

The petition reads:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of 671 constituents of North West Leicestershire and other users of Britain's inland waterways

Declares that...

Our inland waterways are a unique national asset that provide an important contribution to the quality of life for millions of our citizens. We therefore are deeply concerned that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has seen fit to reduce British Waterways' grant by some £60 million over the next 5 years and that of the Environment Agency by £25 million in this financial year. We believe that these cuts will have a devastating effect upon the well-being of inland waterways.

The Petitioners therefore...

Request that the House of Commons call upon the Government to introduce legislation to solve the immediate problems caused by these cuts to current budgets and to ensure that long-term funding is guaranteed to enable continued investment and restoration of the waterways.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Telephone Masts

10.28 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): A constituent of mine has compiled a petition against the erection of a new 40 ft high telephone mast with three antennae near homes and businesses. She wrote to me that local people feel strongly that 0_2 should cite the mast elsewhere and that she has used every ounce of her strength and determination to get the results she has achieved, with the interests of her precious only child and of her community at heart. She is a real star in working for her community, and I need do no more than urge local councillors to listen to her and ensure that the mast is sited in a more appropriate place.

The petition states:

The petition of Cheryl Oldroyd, residents of Canvey Island and others declares that the proposal submitted by 02 to erect a mobile telephone mast on the High Street, Canvey Island, is unacceptable due to the ill-considered suitability of a busy residential and business area for such a structure. The petitioners

[Bob Spink]

emphasise the significant lack of understanding in respect of the longer term effects of such telephone masts on the health of those within the immediate vicinity and particularly on young children. Whilst the petitioners acknowledge the need to erect and maintain such structures in the interests of business, they submit that more suitable locations for this structure are available, of which the applicant is already aware and should consider.

The petitioners therefore request the House to urge the Government to encourage Castle Point Borough Councillors to reject the plans and seek an alternative, less densely populated area, in consideration of the wishes of residents.

To lie upon the Table.

Baby Changing Units

10.30 pm

Bob Spink: I hope that I am not considered greedy in presenting two petitions, like my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), but each of my constituents is, as is each of his, worth any two from other constituencies.

Baby changing units was a new matter to me when this petition came before me, but on investigation I found that it raises serious and valid issues for my constituency. There is even a child safety issue, which I do not have time to go into tonight.

Each council must deliver statutory services, and additional facilities such as public conveniences and facilities for children and mothers. That is especially the case in respect of councils such as Castle Point which charges one of the highest council taxes in the country. Next to the Canvey Knightswick centre toilets, there is a room currently used for storing cleaning equipment that could be converted to a baby changing room, so making that small but important improvement would not be rocket science, and I hope that councillors will act on the petition.

The petition states:

The petition of Tracy Taplin, residents of Canvey Island and others, declares that the existing public facilities on Canvey Island are inadequate for the needs of those with small children, and notes that Castle Point Borough Council has a de facto duty to provide and maintain suitable public facilities, particularly in a busy shopping area, such as Canvey's excellent shopping centre.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons entreats the Government to bring pressure to bear on Castle Point Borough Council to provide a baby changing unit at a suitable location in Canvey Island's shopping centre.

To lie upon the Table.

Crown Post Offices

10.32 pm

Jim Dowd (Lewisham, West) (Lab): I commiserate with my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) on being drawn last in this long series of petitions.

The petition is on behalf of more than 500 constituents and other users of the Forest Hill, London SE23 Crown post office and concerns Post Office plans to merge with WH Smith. I am aware that the scheme is being implemented across the country, and that many other Members' constituencies are being similarly affected.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the London Borough of Lewisham and others, Declares the Petitioners' serious concerns about the future of Post Office counter services in Forest Hill following the announcement that this Post Office Branch will move to WH Smith. The closure of local Sub-Post Offices in recent years has meant a poorer service to customers, particularly for the elderly and disabled, and the petitioners are concerned that this merger may result in a deterioration in the quality of services on offer at present.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State to use his powers to ensure that the Post Office does not reduce the level of services currently available to customers under its new partnership agreement with WH Smith.

To lie upon the Table.

Asylum Seekers (Vouchers)

10.33 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I wish to present a petition from 394 signatories from Teesside and elsewhere. It is signed by Kath Sainsbury, who works tirelessly for all asylum seekers in Teesside.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Teesside and others, Declares the Petitioners' serious concerns about the voucher scheme currently administered to individuals who qualify for support under Section 4 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999. The Petitioners further declare that the vouchers stigmatise and degrade those who are forced to use them. The vouchers fail to meet the needs of the recipient because they can only be used in certain shops for a limited range of goods. Often, these shops are not located in the neighbourhoods where the refugee community live and people are forced to travel—this can cause severe hardship because vouchers are not accepted on public transport, yet voucher recipients do not have the option of using cash.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Home Department to use his powers to rescind the Section 4 voucher scheme and replace it with cash payments.

To lie upon the Table.

Health Services (West Cumbria)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

10.35 pm

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): This is the second time that I have raised in the House the future of health services in west Cumbria, the first time being in December 2005. Almost two years later, there has been some meaningful progress in the provision of health services in the area and the Government continue to provide record levels of investment, but much more still needs to be done. The reason for applying for this debate tonight is that in September, when Parliament will not be sitting, a consultation on the reconfiguration of health services in west Cumbria and Cumbria generally will begin. That consultation has been dubbed the grand plan. With that in mind, it is essential that, on behalf of my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), health service users and health care professionals alike, certain expectations are now set out, listened to and fully understood.

Those expectations relate to health services across west Cumbria, the services provided by West Cumberland hospital, the scope and timescale of the consultation, the need for all sections of west Cumbrian society to be able to take part in that consultation and for the opinion of local medical professionals to be listened to in the process of service design. In December 2005, I told the House that anxiety about health services in west Cumbria was seemingly endemic, that the people of west Cumbria had harboured deep anxieties concerning the local health services for well over 20 years and that their fears—my fears—are long held and not simply in response to any given public debate about the NHS at any given time. That is still the case.

Ever since I can remember, the people of west Cumbria have had to fend off one threat or another to the services provided by their hospital. For more than 20 years now, *The Whitehaven News* has reported on what has appeared to be a perpetual threat to our hospital services—most recently through the excellent save our services campaign, which has provided so many local people with an opportunity to have their voices heard. Like my constituents, I want an end to the threats. I want us to be free of the threats and free of fear, and that is what I expect the forthcoming consultation to provide.

The Minister will no doubt be aware of the background to tonight's debate and the imminent consultation. West Cumbria is a unique area which provides unique health policy challenges. With approximately 160,000 people, west Cumbria is both urban and rural: the majority of people live in urban areas, but in small urban areas separated from other urban areas by vast tracts of rural expanse that themselves contain numerous small rural villages. Population centres are widely dispersed, the communications infrastructure is poor, public transport is poorer still and car ownership is low. In addition, west Cumbria is host to perhaps the most strategically sensitive industrial installation in this or any other country—Sellafield. Put simply, there is no off the shelf solution for the health policy issues facing west Cumbria. Our unique situation requires unique policy solutions and there are no people better placed than the service users and service providers of health care in west Cumbria to produce and implement the solutions. Inevitably, that will require change of some kind, but it must be change for the better.

It is clear that change in the NHS is incredibly hard to achieve for a number of reasons. The size of the organisation means that change is complex, difficult and expensive. The nature of health care means that expert bodies will often violently disagree about the best way forward. The new Secretary of State has recognised all of that, identifying where the Government have got their approach wrong in the past, where they failed to listen to professionals and where they pursued change too quickly. The Secretary of State has called for a period of calm and stability in the NHS and the Prime Minister—the man responsible as Chancellor of the Exchequer for trebling the budget of the NHS—has said that the NHS is his immediate priority. Both approaches are exactly right for the health service in west Cumbria at this moment in time, but I would go further still.

For almost four years now, the health economy of Cumbria has endured a series of consultations, reviews, reorganisations and reconfigurations. The pace of that process has been painful and the objectives very often unclear. The grand plan consultation must avoid the mistakes of the past and bring an end to the uncertainty and confusion.

I mentioned at the outset of this debate that there had been some meaningful progress in the west Cumbrian health economy. I shall give details of some of that progress. West Cumberland hospital opened in 1964 and it was the first new hospital to be built in Britain after Labour's creation of the NHS. I am proud of this fact. I am proud too of the staff who work there, their care and commitment, their devotion and their absolute professionalism.

I am pleased that West Cumberland hospital is among the best in the country at preventing MRSA infections. I am pleased that our hospital trust has achieved two-star status. I am pleased that the independent Healthcare Commission reports that standards of care at our hospital are rated as good, and improving all the time. I am pleased that staff in the NHS are being paid better than ever before; they waited a long time for that and they deserve every penny.

In west Cumbria, we have been promised a new acute district general hospital. Our community hospitals in places such as Millom, Keswick, Cockermouth, Maryport and Workington have been saved thanks to the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington and me, facilitated by an additional £18.5 million cash injection from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, over and above the record investment made by the Government. I record my thanks to my hon. Friend, who continues to stand shoulder to shoulder with me as we work to improve the health services of west Cumbria. By convention he is not allowed to speak in this place but he makes up for that outside.

[Mr. Jamie Reed]

Cynics decry the record investment that Labour has put into the NHS. By cynics, I mean those who want to destabilise the NHS by claiming that increasing investment serves no purpose, and worse, in the case of the Conservatives, those who want to cut NHS spending as part of their £21 billion-worth of public spending cuts. However, I am delighted that the Government are investing unprecedented amounts in health services in west Cumbria and in Cumbria as a whole. When I last debated these issues, local NHS spending had risen by 97 per cent. since Labour came to power.

In addition, in April, North West strategic health authority, which covers Cumbria, saw its budget rise by 9.3 per cent.—an increase of £878.2 million. At the same time, Cumbria primary care trust received a 9 per cent. increase in revenue funding—an increase of £56.6 million—taking the revenue budget for the PCT from £632.5 million in 2006-07 to £689.2 million for this financial year, which is the 29th largest increase of the 152 PCTs in England.

The increase comes at a particularly appropriate time, as it means that more money is available to the PCT with which to commission services in west Cumbria, in particular at West Cumberland hospital, than ever before. That increase in funding must be reflected in the PCT's grand plan and in the design of services provided at either West Cumberland hospital or a new acute hospital for west Cumbria. The sum of £56.6 million should go a long way in west Cumbria and having been given that additional money, the PCT must act equitably and responsibly to ensure that the grand plan delivers for west Cumbria and west Cumbrians. But that is not enough.

Despite those real improvements and unquestionable investments, I want our services to improve further still—they have to—and it is through the grand plan that I expect the improvements to be realised. When the new Cumbria PCT was brought into being, it promised, through its grand plan, to bring to an end the corrosive doubts about services. The plan is designed to be a final examination of all health services provided across the whole county of Cumbria, with a view to improving services and accessibility to services, driving up clinical standards and achieving clinical and financial sustainability.

I welcome the motives underpinning the plan. However, a great deal of work needs to be done with regard to the plan in terms of its time scale, scope, process and the involvement of medical professionals and the public. I hope the Minister will outline for the benefit of my constituents exactly how she now expects Cumbria PCT to facilitate that.

It is appropriate at this stage to welcome, in principle, the recently announced NHS next stage review to be undertaken by Professor Darzi. The terms of reference state that it will be clinically driven, patient centred and responsive to local communities. The review seeks to deliver NHS services centred on clinical decision making, improved joined-up patient care, more accessible integrated care and a

"health service based less on central direction and more on patient control, choice and local accountability and which ensures services are responsive to patients and local communities".

Professor Darzi will publish an interim report in October and a full report next year, but I want the west Cumbria grand plan to incorporate those objectives now. I will not countenance another review of services in west Cumbria inadvertently caused by the Darzi review, so can the Minister assure me that she will ensure that the grand plan for health services in west Cumbria will now take account of the Darzi review terms of reference?

I can think of no better précis of how the people of west Cumbria would like their health services to be configured than that outlined in Professor Darzi's terms of reference. When I speak to clinicians and medical professionals they tell me that they want to ensure that their abilities and skills are channelled into meeting local needs. Service users, young and old, on urban estates and in rural villages, tell me that they want a health service that is responsive to the needs of their local community. Expectant mothers tell me increasingly of their desire for choice and everyone—particularly those in the throes of a public consultation—is energised by the need for local accountability in their local health service. Decision making in the NHS cannot always be described as transparent, but transparent, honest and open the grand plan consultation must be.

I could talk at length about a number of key health services in west Cumbria that in themselves would easily fill the time allocated for this debate. I could talk about the need for drastic improvements in dentistry provision, or the real need to address the implementation of local mental health services, or the importance of accident and emergency services at West Cumberland hospital. I expect the grand plan to address all of those, but I wish to talk tonight about consultant-led maternity services at West Cumberland hospital—not because my wife is seven months pregnant and due to give birth there in September, but because as a service it underpins so much of what other acute service provision must encompass in a general district hospital such as West Cumberland hospital.

Perhaps more importantly, this is about social justice. Centralisation of maternity services in my constituency does not mean the same as it might for other colleagues in all parts of the House. We are not talking about moving services six, seven or eight miles away in this instance, but 42 miles—42 miles of road between Whitehaven and Carlisle, characterised by steep undulations, blind corners, slow-moving heavy freight and agricultural traffic.

I believe that the case for maintaining those services at West Cumberland hospital is irrefutable. A convincing case has never been made for the centralisation of obstetric services in Carlisle; on the contrary, there is a clear and irresistible case against centralisation. This case is now supported by national experts, national guidelines and clinical practitioners. I have spoken with service users, special interest groups, national experts and clinicians since centralisation was suggested, and have found, with very few exceptions, widespread opposition to the suggestion.

The case for retaining a consultant-led maternity unit at West Cumberland hospital and its potential replacement is based on a number of factors. West Cumbria's birth rate is rising. It continues to rise and is on an upward trend. Last year the hospital delivered 1,330 babies—an increase of 3.7 per cent. on the previous year. The national increase is currently 1 per cent. In 2002, the hospital delivered 1,163 babies. The number of deliveries has risen by 167 over a four-year period—an increase of almost 13 per cent.

The performance of the consultant-led maternity unit at West Cumberland hospital is impressive. Its perinatal mortality rate is steadily declining. In fact, the latest figures show that its figures are significantly better than the national average. The latest available UK figures, for 2003-04, show an average perinatal mortality rate of 8.2 births per thousand births. In 2006, the perinatal mortality rate for West Cumbria was 4.5 per thousand births.

Consultant-led maternity units are safer and more cost-effective than midwifery-led units. In June 2006 the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence published draft guidelines on intrapartum care. NICE found that although midwifery-led units were cheaper to operate, consultant-led units were more cost-effective. NICE also identified a higher perinatal mortality ratio of 7.2 to 7.8 per thousand deliveries in MLUs, as opposed to a rate of 5.1 per thousand deliveries in consultant-led units.

Centralisation would lead to inequalities of access to care and remove the choice of west Cumbrian women. The national service framework for children, young people and maternity services, published in October 2004 states that

"care should be provided within a framework that enables easy and early transfer of women and babies who unexpectedly require specialist care."

The emergency ambulance "blue light" transfer time between west Cumberland hospital and Cumberland infirmary in Carlisle is now one hour 42 minutes. Currently, most women giving birth in north Cumbria are within 35 minutes of obstetric care; centralisation would increase this time by almost 200 per cent.

Centralisation would also mean that west Cumbrian women were necessarily either classified as high or low risk, with all high-risk patients being immediately transferred to a centralised obstetric unit. That removes choice, in direct contradiction of Government policy.

In addition, the vast majority of west Cumbrian women require obstetric intervention in labour. Obstetric risk prediction is exceptionally difficult. This risk is mitigated by births taking place in an obstetric unit, where most eventualities can be catered for. Of the 1,330 births at West Cumberland hospital last year, the vast majority required obstetric intervention. Given the imprecise nature of obstetric risk prediction, the World Health Organisation has recommended:

"In order to significantly reduce maternal mortality, all pregnant, labouring and recently delivered women must have access to essential obstetric care should complications arise."

Centralisation would mean approximately 1,000 west Cumbrian women per year being transferred to Carlisle to give birth.

Distance matters: women more than 15 miles from an obstetric unit face hugely increased risks. The British journal of gynaecology published studies in 2002 which identified that living more than 15 miles from a maternity hospital was one of the most important variables in maternal mortality.

Perhaps more importantly, the Cumbrian health infrastructure cannot accommodate obstetric centralisation. The centralisation of obstetric services at Carlisle would distort the finances and resources of the local NHS. Significant new investment in human resources and the physical infrastructure would have to be made to Cumberland infirmary to accommodate approximately 1,000 new cases every year, and the most likely effect is that the necessary financial and human resources would be diverted from West Cumberland hospital or its replacement.

In addition, national experts refuse to recommend centralisation. Dr. Maggie Blott, author of the North Cumbria Acute Hospitals NHS Trust's obstetric and midwifery service review report wrote that

"There is no obvious solution"

with regard to reconfiguring services and was unable to recommend centralising services in Carlisle. Local lay members of the steering group also refused to recommend centralisation. They wrote that centralisation would do little to address the needs of disadvantaged groups in west Cumbria and that west Cumbrian women would not regard centralisation as either safe or equitable. The national maternity tsar has also acknowledged the unique needs of west Cumbria. In "Making it Better: For Mother and Baby", published in February 2007, Dr. Sheila Shribman wrote:

"what will be right for Whitechapel will not necessarily work in Whitehaven. There is no optimum number of births to make a unit sustainable."

This is a very brief synopsis of the weight of evidence against centralisation. These decisions will be made locally. I have put this argument to Cumbria PCT, and I will pursue the issue relentlessly. Given the weight of the argument and the strength of public opinion, I expect that the grand plan for health service reconfiguration throughout Cumbria will incorporate those views and recognise the unique nature of west Cumbria's health care needs.

One of the three separate petitions, totalling more than 30,000 signatures, that I have presented in recent months to the House relating to health services in west Cumbria related specifically to consultant-led maternity services.

In conclusion, I want Ministers to scrutinise the grand plan consultation for Cumbria and ensure that it is transparent, open, honest and accessible. I want Ministers to ensure that, as well as the views of the public, those of the medical professionals will be incorporated in the consultation. In addition, I want Ministers to ensure that socio-economic and national strategic considerations are addressed in the consultation. The consultation must recognise the unique qualities of west Cumbria: pockets of isolated social deprivation, peripherality and the considerable challenges and national obligations provided in the shape of the nuclear industry. West Cumbria provides unique health policy challenges, and that must be

[Mr. Jamie Reed]

recognised. On top of that, I want the consultation to take account of the Darzi review, so that the consultation in west Cumbria is final and not subject to further delay.

Finally, I should like Ministers to visit West Cumberland hospital to meet staff and patient representatives to hear their views and to ensure that the PCT takes account of them. The Minister is a former nurse and understands the issues, and I look forward to her response.

10.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) on securing this debate. The future of health services in west Cumbria is of great concern to him, as he has demonstrated on many occasions, particularly in his contribution tonight, and I appreciate the comments that he has made in the House today. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) for all the work that he has done for the health service in the areas that they serve.

I acknowledge the important role that my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland has played in raising the profile of this issue and in keeping Ministers regularly up to date with progress, with consultations and public meetings. He is a real unsung hero of his area, and his constituents should be very proud of him. I also to pay tribute to the 1.3 million staff who work in the national health service, particularly the staff in west Cumbria who have made an enormous contribution to improving the local NHS and to whom my hon. Friend referred in his speech. Those achievements have been made following the record investment by the Government, from £33 billion in 1997, rising to over £92 billion by 2008.

My hon. Friend made great reference to the review of services and how we deliver health care. That is absolutely paramount for the future. Of course, he also referred to my noble Friend Professor Ara Darzi and the way he will conduct the review of our health services. I understand that my hon. Friend has been in great conversation recently with the chief executive of NHS North West to discuss this issue, particularly funding. I ask my hon. Friend to keep me updated on all the consultations, because they are paramount to the future of health services in the area.

The newly formed Cumbria primary care trust had an out-turn deficit of £36 million at the end of 2006-07 and it is intended to look at a whole new system of undertaking in relation to financial viability, so that the health service in the area is fit for purpose but also effective and affordable.

My hon. Friend mentioned the anxiety and fear that surround any change to health services. I relate to that, because sometimes not everybody in the area plays fair on a consultation. Fear and anxiety for patients, potential patients and staff who work in the NHS must be brought to a conclusion soon.

The review is looking at acute hospital services, and mental health and community care services. The aim is to achieve a better use of clinical resources while keeping services close to people. The Department's gateway review team gave its initial assessment of the process and Cumbria primary care trust is working to address the points highlighted by the review team. The public consultation on proposals emerging from the review is now planned for September of this year. The proposals for the future shape of health services across Cumbria will be shaped by the findings of the feasibility work done following the previous Morecambe bay consultation, and by the commitment given by Cumbria primary care trust to North Cumbria Acute Hospitals NHS Trust to provide a new hospital in west Cumbria.

I note the concerns that my hon. Friend raised and I can assure him that the consultation will be open, honest and transparent, with decisions taken locally that reflect local needs and are based on appropriate clinical evidence. There is no other way for us to go forward with the health service. We should involve everybody.

My hon. Friend made an important point about the provision of maternity services. He is an expectant parent and I am sure that the whole House understands the sentiment with which he spoke tonight. He makes a valid point about the distance between the two hospitals and the road conditions. I also appreciate the relevance of the national service framework for children, young people and maternity services, which my Department published in 2004.

It is with regret—especially as my hon. Friend mentioned my former profession—that I have to say that I cannot give him a commitment about what services will be located where. However, it is vital that the issues are debated as part of the consultation exercise and it is appropriate for local people to voice their opinions on matters such as these, which are important to them. I stress the safety element that he raised. I am sure that all Members appreciate the importance that he attached to that.

My hon. Friend will appreciate that I cannot speculate at this stage on the details of the consultation or indeed its outcome. It is relevant to local people, clinically led and will be transparent. The debate needs to happen locally and if, in the end, there are concerns about whatever option is preferred, the overview and scrutiny committee can of course refer the matter to the Secretary of State for Health for a final decision. As my hon. Friend may be aware, the Secretary of Sate has already indicated his willingness to refer all reconfiguration proposals that are referred to him to an independent reconfiguration panel. In that way, we can be sure that such decisions, which are of great importance to my hon. Friend and his constituents, properly reflect local clinical considerations.

The issue of the new hospital is a major concern to my hon. Friend. I am aware that he has had several meetings with officials and Ministers and I commend his commitment to his constituents in pursuing the matter with such vigour. I had a similar experience in my constituency and found that determination wins through in the end. The North Cumbria Acute Hospitals NHS Trust's strategic outline business case to build a new hospital for west Cumbria was approved by the former Cumbria and Lancashire strategic health authority in January 2006. Cumbria primary care trust and North Cumbria Acute Hospitals NHS Trust have

given assurances that there will be a new hospital for west Cumbria. However, it is not possible at this stage to give details of location and size, or the services that will be offered, because these will be developed in the context of the whole systems review.

As noted earlier, the health service review is very important, and Members of Parliament should encourage their constituents to express their views in the consultation process. That process will shape the future of the NHS, which enters its 60th year next year. I understand the concerns outlined by my hon. Friend and I urge him to continue his dialogue with the local NHS in what is still a pre-consultation discussion.

I have noted the observations made by my hon. Friend and I am sure that he will understand why I cannot comment further, given the proposed consultation process. However, I can assure him that the process will be an open one—and that I would very much like to visit his part of the world, which is noted for its beauty, complexity and uniqueness. It is better see that combination with one's own eyes, as that is the way to greater knowledge.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle) (Lab): I hope that the Minister will also visit the Cumberland infirmary, which is in my constituency.

Ann Keen: I have been overwhelmed by invitations in the past couple of weeks, and feel confident that I will be able to visit my hon. Friend.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland will continue to engage with the local NHS and encourage his constituents to take the opportunity to make their views known through the consultation process. I will also ensure that his views are conveyed to the strategic health authority in the area.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 25 July 2007

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

HARMONDSWORTH AND CAMPSFIELD HOUSE IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRES

Resolved,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report dated 25th July 2007 of the Investigation into the disturbances at Harmondsworth and Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centres.—*[Mr. Watson.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Policing

1. **Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): What funding was allocated to policing in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years; and what the forecast budget is for 2008-09. [151122]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): The total resource funding allocated to policing in Northern Ireland in each of the past three years was £860 million in 2005-06, £889 million in 2006-07 and £960 million in the current year of 2007-08. The allocation for policing in Northern Ireland for 2008-09 will not be determined until the comprehensive spending review has been concluded.

Mr. Donaldson: I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware that the Northern Ireland Policing Board and the Chief Constable are concerned about a possible reduction in the police budget in the forthcoming financial year, and that there are increasing pressures on the budget as a result of policing the past, the ongoing inquiries, and the cost of the legal advice that the police need to secure in order to participate in them. However, does he agree that it is right that the Government provide adequate funding for the ordinary policing in the community that tackles all the matters that concern the people of Northern Ireland? Does he accept that there should not be a reduction in the police budget, given the increasing costs of the inquiries that I have mentioned? Will the Government do something to reduce the cost of the inquiries, and ensure that adequate policing is provided for all the victims of crime in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Speaker: That sounds like an Adjournment debate to me.

Paul Goggins: Mr. Speaker, we had the Adjournment debate yesterday, and in it we covered much of the territory in the hon. Gentleman's question. However, I shall start with the facts. This year's budget for the Police Service of Northern Ireland is £100 million more than it was two years ago. As for the CSR discussions, I assure him that we want to maintain the same police numbers—that is, 7,500 officers—as we have at the moment. For obvious reasons, that is rather more than one would find in the average police service in the rest of the UK. What matters too is how those resources are deployed. That is very important, and the Chief Constable's commitment to neighbourhood policing is very welcome.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) touches on another important issue that no doubt will be touched on later in our proceedings today. We cannot go on spending on investigations into the past without there being a knock-on effect on both present and future services. The CSR considerations that are going on at the moment will be important in that respect, but I am committed to making sure that we continue to provide the necessary funding for the PSNI, and I am determined that that will happen.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the Minister assure the House that budget constraints in the future will not curb or compromise the roll-out and full implementation of the Patten vision for policing? This morning, the Police Service has had to seal off a number of streets in Derry city centre because of hoax devices. Will he join me in condemning the so-called dissident republicans responsible for such attacks? At a time when Derry city centre is seeing the fruits of normalisation and the removal of military installations, the attacks serve only to bring the British Army, in the form of the bomb disposal units, back on to the streets there.

Paul Goggins: I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are fully signed up to what he describes as the Patten vision, and that we will continue to deliver on it. That will include making sure that the PSNI reflects more fully the composition of Northern Ireland's population. Over the past three years, we have committed £178 million to fulfilling the Patten vision for policing in Northern Ireland. He has told the House about the events in Derry, and I of course join him and others in condemning dissident republicans who continue to think that violence and conflict are the way forward, when the truth is that politics is the way forward. Equally, however, I condemn those loyalist paramilitaries who were involved in the shooting of a police officer at the weekend. That is just as damnable, and such actions are increasingly marginal in a Northern Ireland society where real politics is taking over and determining the future.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Does not the Minister's very proper condemnation of the events of yesterday and the weekend underline the necessity for keeping an absolutely first-class police force in Northern Ireland, under the inspired leadership of an admirable Chief Constable? Will he

ring-fence expenditure on the past and try to ensure that is totally separate from the running budget for police needs?

Paul Goggins: The special fund of £34 million that we have provided for the historical inquiries team to look into the unresolved murders of the years of the troubles is, of course, additional money that does not come out of the day-to-day policing budget. It is important that we focus all the resources that we can on day-to-day policing—that is on neighbourhood policing and dealing with antisocial behaviour, for example—but we must also deal with the remaining threats from dissident republicans, loyalist paramilitaries or those involved in organised crime networks. I know that the hon. Gentleman cares very deeply about such matters, and that he will agree that we must remain very strongly focused on them.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Assets Recovery Agency has an important role to play in deterring crime, as well as potentially obtaining more funds for policing in Northern Ireland? Can he outline the progress the Government have made in obtaining funds through that source?

Paul Goggins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He is right: where assets are seized and turned back into cash, it can be put back into front-line police services. I am pleased to say that with some of that money the Police Service of Northern Ireland has just taken on 60 new financial investigators, who will further improve the capacity for that work. The ARA is doing a tremendous job in Northern Ireland and its work will be redoubled and strengthened when it merges with the Serious Organised Crime Agency next year. Of course, partnership with our colleagues in the Republic is also an important element of that work.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister on their appointments and thank them very much for their kindness this week following the terrible flooding in my constituency. I apologise to you, Mr. Speaker, and the House for having to leave shortly after this question to attend to those problems.

Given that the security situation has improved so much, is it not rather unfortunate that over the past 10 years the level of policing has dropped from 8,500 to 7,500 officers, and also that the full-time reservist force has dropped from 3,000 to fewer than 700 and the part-time reservist force from 1,300 to fewer than 900? Although we hope that the security situation continues to improve, are not those figures of a little concern to the Minister?

Paul Goggins: On behalf of my right hon. Friend, may I express our sympathies to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents for the difficulties that they face?

At 7,500, the PSNI has greater strength than any other police service in the United Kingdom. Significantly, confidence in the PSNI shows an encouraging story: 75 per cent. of people in Northern Ireland express full confidence in the police service that they receive. We should all take encouragement from that.

Maze Prison Site

2. **Mr. Shailesh Vara** (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the future of the Maze prison site. [151123]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): The future of the Maze prison site is now the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive. To date, they have not sought discussions with me on the matter, but of course I would be happy to meet them to discuss it further if they wish.

Mr. Vara: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment and thank him for that reply. The estimated cost of building a national stadium at the Long Kesh Maze site is between £43 million and £400 million. Will the right hon. Gentleman give the House a definitive figure, to the extent that he is able to do so, after taking account of all contingency and additional costs?

Mr. Woodward: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks.

The matter is now devolved and it is for the Executive in Northern Ireland, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment on it. Suffice it to say that it is under review; the Executive are looking at a business case and I understand that they will bring it back in the autumn.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. He will be aware that the people of Northern Ireland are pleased that the question of the future of the Maze is now in the hands of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but will he make sure that every piece of information relating to the stadium is put into the public domain so that people such as Northern Ireland football supporters do not have to go to freedom of information legislation to obtain information about various aspects of the process that seem to have been kept very secret? Will he assure the Minister for Finance and Personnel in Northern Ireland that every bit of information will be put into the public domain?

Mr. Woodward: In so far as it is appropriate for me to do so, yes.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be well aware of the almost total opposition of Northern Ireland football supporters to the siting of the stadium at the Maze. He will also be aware of the total opposition of Unionists to the provision of a shrine to hunger strikers at the Maze—something that is already happening, promoted by Sinn Fein. Will he give an assurance that no agreements made in the past by direct rule Ministers or actions taken by direct rule Ministers in the future will limit the ability of the Executive and the Assembly in

Northern Ireland to be the final arbiters of what happens to the Maze site and the location of the national stadium?

Mr. Woodward: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, of course, this is now a matter for the Executive—the final decision will be theirs—but I remind him that when direct rule Ministers looked at the issue, it was the subject of enormous consultation and that the decision was endorsed by all three major sporting bodies—those for soccer, rugby and Gaelic football? However, these are now matters for the Executive.

In respect of the hon. Gentleman's observations about what some have described as a terrorist shrine, there is no question of its being a terrorist shrine and, frankly, to suggest that it is, as I think that he knows, denigrates the work done by the Maze consultation panel. It came up with proposals and a way forward on all this, and it would be best to remember the words of the Deputy First Minister, who said yesterday:

"I am not argu[redacted] any kind of shrine...If we want a conflict transforma[redacted]e, then it has to concentrate on how we resolve conflict."

His[redacted]al Inquiries

3. **Mr. Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): How much has been spent on ongoing historical inquiries in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [151124]

6. **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): How much has been spent on ongoing historical inquiries in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [151127]

7. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of ongoing historical inquiries in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [151128]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): The Bloody Sunday inquiry, the Robert Hamill, Rosemary Nelson and Billy Wright inquiries and the Police Service of Northern Ireland's historical inquiries team were established to address specific issues arising from Northern Ireland's past. The total cost of the four public inquiries, as at April 2007, is £211 million. The estimated expenditure of the historical inquiries team at end March 2007 is £9.9 million. I have placed a more detailed breakdown of expenditure in the Library today for the benefit of right hon. and hon. Members.

Mr. Harper: Has the Secretary of State made any assessment of how many of the 3,268 murders related to the security situation that are being investigated by the historical inquiry team are likely to lead to the establishment of a separate public inquiry?

Mr. Woodward: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the historical inquiries team was specifically set up by the Chief Constable to focus on providing resolution, where possible, for the families affected by those deaths in a way that would command the confidence of the wider community. There is no question but that it has been successful, particularly in its specific purpose of engaging with families. As for prosecutions, that is, of course, a matter for the Chief Constable.

Mr. Mackay: Does the Secretary of State accept that those of us who supported setting up the Bloody Sunday inquiry would not have done so if we had known that, by now, it would cost £180 million? It has not yet concluded, and it almost certainly has not brought the closure that we all desired.

Mr. Woodward: Undoubtedly, the costs of the Bloody Sunday inquiry are higher than many people would like. Of course, the Government are committed to ensuring not only that the inquiry has the resources to do the job, but that we can bring about best value for money for the public purse. The fact of the matter is that, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, justice must take its course. The inquiry has had to interview more than 900 witnesses. There have been endless judicial review proceedings. None the less, it is now proceeding towards its end, and we expect and hope that its resolution will come soon.

Robert Neill: I apologise for not have heard all the answer, Mr. Speaker.

The Secretary of State has been helpful in what he has said, but will he tell me whether he in the Department or someone in the devolved Administration decides which inquiry will take place and determines the extent of the investigation and the budgetary parameters? Who decides whether it is appropriate to hold an inquiry and on what terms?

Mr. Woodward: The conduct of most of the inquiries that are taking place is already set out, and they are already proceeding along their courses. A number of inquiries are under way. I am not quite sure which inquiry the hon. Gentleman is referring to, but I am happy to discuss that with him or to pursue it by letter. Of course, inquiry matters are for me to set out, but once under way, they are matters for the chairman or the judge involved.

Mr. Nigel Dodds (Belfast, North) (DUP): The Secretary of State says that justice must take its course, but does he accept that many of the innocent victims in Northern Ireland see no justice? What they see is hundreds of millions of pounds being spent for political purposes by the Government and others to pursue a vendetta against the security forces and those who work to defeat terrorism. I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position, but will he do something to redress the balance in favour of the victims and against the terrorists and those who would seek to rewrite history?

Mr. Woodward: There is no question in anybody's mind of inquiries being confused with vendettas. The inquiries are there precisely to establish the truth, and it is absolutely right that they continue to do so. However, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the future of inquiries and how we handle the past. That is why my predecessor—I pay tribute to the work that he did not only in this area, but during his entire time as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland over the previous two years—set up the consultative group. Its purpose, under Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, is to see whether, across the entire community of Northern Ireland, we can find a consensus on how to deal with the past. There is no question but that we

must continue to discover the truth about the past. That will never be sacrificed. However, we also have to find a way to deal with the past that does not leave us in a divided past, but allows us to use our inquiries as a way of healing for the future.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to their new positions and offer the best wishes of my party to them in doing what remains, potentially, a very difficult job. I share many of the concerns about the price of the inquiries, but we should never lose sight of their value. The Secretary of State just referred to the Bradley and Eames commission on the past. Does he accept that that is an inquiry of a different order? Will he ensure that its deliberations are properly resourced and that any recommendations it makes will be properly implemented?

Mr. Woodward: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post and I am sure that he will be extremely successful. I also welcome the co-operation that he has already offered me in my job. I agree with most of what he said, but, on the other hand, I cannot second-guess the outcome of the work of Lord Eames and Denis Bradley. I have every confidence that if a consensus can be found on how to deal with the past for the future, they are the people who will help to find it from within the community. It is my intention to publish the findings of their report, but that will be based on consultation with them.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his office and wish him well. We were both elected as Conservative MPs in 1997 and it is an interesting reflection on the different ways in which we have spent the past 10 years that we hold our current posts. I intend to build on the sterling work of my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), who supported the Government through the current process, but did not offer them a blank cheque. On the question of cheques, will the Secretary of State estimate the total cost of all the current and future inquires, and say when he thinks they may be completed?

Mr. Woodward: Since the hon. Gentleman invites me to look at the past, and the time when we were both elected, I will say to him that it took me two years to realise that the Conservatives were the party of the past and that Labour remains and will be the party of the future. Even though he has remained in the Conservative party for eight years longer than I did, if he wants to come across now, I am sure that we can always find a place for him here.

In relation to the hon. Gentleman's question about the cost of future inquiries, in the case of the four public inquiries currently under way, we anticipate further expenditure of about £60 million. We have set aside for the historical inquiries team £34 million, of which £10 million has already been spent, leaving a further £24 million, which we expect to be spent by the various agencies in Northern Ireland in looking at the past.

Mr. Paterson: That was a helpful reply. The Secretary of State knows that the Chief Constable has stated that retrospective work is absorbing 40 per cent. of police time. Can he confirm whether, in his opinion, the time may come when, in the interests of current police priorities, it will be sensible to draw a line under further historical inquiries?

Mr. Woodward: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post. I believe that he has already taken the opportunity of discussing some of the issues with the Chief Constable. There is no question but that investigations into the past are a considerable burden for the Chief Constable, in terms of resources, manpower and time, but we should recognise that the investigations and inquiries have played a critical role in allowing us to get to where we are with devolution, the Assembly and the Executive in Northern Ireland. Crucially, as was said earlier by my hon. Friend the Minister of State who has responsibility for security, there are unparalleled levels of confidence in policing in Northern Ireland. The way in which the Chief Constable has dealt with the past is exemplary, and that has been crucial to ensuring those levels of police confidence. As for the future, we have asked the consultative group to consider the issues and find a consensus. I will not second-guess what it will find, but I will pay very close attention to the work that it produces.

Prisons (Illegal Drugs)

4. **Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce illegal drug use in prisons in Northern Ireland. [151125]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): Positive action has already been taken by the Prison Service, and I have asked the director to review measures to reduce the supply of, and demand for, illegal drugs in prisons—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister should be allowed to be heard. It is very noisy in the Chamber.

Paul Goggins: Further proposals are to be put to me in the autumn.

Mr. Hollobone: Given that so many prisoners are heavily dependent on drugs when convicted, and that so many prisoners suffer from mental illness through drug use, what extra measures will the Minister introduce to encourage the rehabilitation of prisoners while they are in jail, so that they come off drugs?

Paul Goggins: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that we need to deal with not just the supply of, but the demand for, illegal drugs in prisons. I was at Hydebank Wood prison earlier this week, and I saw the work of an organisation called Opportunity Youth, which works to support, help and counsel young people there. Its results are very good, in terms of lowering recidivism rates and ensuring a worthwhile future for those young people. When the director brings his recommendations to me, I expect him to include measures that will give people support and help in dealing with their addiction problems.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): In the Minister's opinion, are the sentences handed down by the courts in Northern Ireland for drug-related offences—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must give the hon. Gentleman a chance to be heard; otherwise it is unfair.

David Simpson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the Minister's opinion, are the sentences a stiff enough punishment, and a great enough deterrent?

Paul Goggins: Of course, sentencing is a matter for the judiciary, rather than Ministers, but I know that the hon. Gentleman is concerned with the need to make sure that for serious offences, particularly sexual crime and drugs offences, the punishment fits the crime. I can tell him and the rest of the House that later in the year I will bring forward proposals for a reform of the sentencing framework in Northern Ireland, which will include the possibility of tougher sentences for dangerous and violent offenders.

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that it is not just in Northern Ireland that drugs coming into prisons are a problem; recently in Scotland, a solicitor was sent to jail for bringing drugs into prison. Will he ensure that there is adequate funding in Northern Ireland, not only for searches—we must make sure that they are much more sophisticated—but to ensure that the consequences for people convicted of bringing drugs into prisons are advertised, so that people know what they are up against when they do it?

Paul Goggins: Of course my hon. Friend is right: the problem of drugs in prisons, regrettable as it is, is not unique to Northern Ireland. It affects the prison system in Scotland, England and Wales, too, and it requires drug testing to take place. There are also issues of support for those with an addiction problem. I assure him that we will continue to pay attention to the subject, and to invest in it, and we will continue to learn about what works best from prisons in other jurisdictions.

Illegal Drugs (Cross-border Movement)

5. **Angela Watkinson** (Upminster) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of the Republic of Ireland on cross-border movement of illegal drugs; and if he will make a statement. [151126]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): There is close and effective co-operation between law enforcement agencies north and south of the border. Following the recent election in the Republic of Ireland, I hope shortly to meet the new Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to discuss a range of issues, including the movement of illegal drugs.

Angela Watkinson: Home Office statistics show that since 1998, when the current method of recording crime was introduced, there has been an increase of 35.5 per cent. in recorded drug trafficking offences. What additional help is being given to the police to help them identify the paramilitary groups that are involved in drug trafficking and dealing?

Paul Goggins: We take drug misuse and drug trafficking very seriously indeed, and I can assure the hon. Lady that there is close co-operation between the Garda Siochana and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to deal with the issue. I give them my full support as the Minister, and also as the chairman of the organised crime taskforce. We must stop drugs poisoning the lives of young people in communities in Northern Ireland, and none of us should rest until that is the case.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [152110] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 July.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): Before I list my engagements, I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in sending our profound condolences to the families and friends of the four servicemen killed in Iraq over the past week—the three senior aircraftsmen from the RAF killed last Thursday, Chris Dunsmore of 504 Squadron Royal Auxiliary Air Force, Peter McFerran of 1 Squadron Royal Air Force, and Matthew Caulwell of 1 Squadron Royal Air Force, and at the weekend Lance-Corporal Timothy Flowers from the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. They died doing important work in the service of their country and our country, and we owe them and others who have lost their lives a deep debt of gratitude.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Philip Davies: Since the right hon. Gentleman became Prime Minister, he has allowed the release from prison of 951 criminals who had been judged too dangerous to release from prison on a tag. If those people were too dangerous to be out of prison on a tag, why are they now safe to be released from prison without a tag?

The Prime Minister: I have studied the case that the Opposition have been making. Last week they quoted the National Association of Probation Officers, which says that it is not opposed to the end-of-custody licences. It has no objection in principle to them at all. As for the hon. Gentleman's point about tagging and home detention curfew, the people who were let out were let out four and a half months early under home detention curfew. The people who were let out in the past few weeks were let out on 6 July, whereas otherwise they would have been let out on 24 July. There was only 18 days' difference. The major change that we have made as a Government over the past few weeks is to build more prison places, which the Opposition could not afford because they would not have the money to do it.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend and all the other Ministers for the interest that they have taken in Gloucestershire. I pay due regard to the emergency services for the superb

work that they have undertaken, and I pass on my commiserations to my colleagues in the county and all their constituents. However, can it be right that we are told that it will take 14 days to get back our main drinking supplies? There is much misinformation about who is off the mains supply and who is likely to be off. All the businesses, farms and individual households want some certainty. It cannot be the case that we must wait so long in this day and age because of the present crisis. For some time Severn Trent has needed to understand that it must act more quickly. I hope my right hon. Friend will make sure that that happens.

The Prime Minister: Let me join my hon. Friend in expressing my sympathy to all the people in the Gloucester, Tewkesbury and related areas who have suffered an enormous amount of inconvenience as a result of the storms and then the floods. I also pay tribute to the emergency services—the police, the fire services, the Army and all those who have worked to try to get supplies into the areas and to make sure that the utilities are back serving the people. My hon. Friend is right that Mythe water station failed. He is right that we would like it back in use as quickly as possible. He is also right that all the civil engineering capacity that can be brought to bear is being brought to bear. The water works were polluted. There is, therefore, a danger that the water pouring out from there would contaminate local people. We have made it clear to the Severn water company that it has to provide the bowsers for the area. Nine hundred have already been provided, and 900 will be provided within the next day. Drinking water is being provided through the retail stores. I think that the company has discharged its duty in ensuring that that water is available. Obviously we want Mythe water station back as quickly as possible. I will visit the area later today, and I have invited the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) and Gloucestershire Members on both sides of the House to join me on that visit, when we will see at first hand how things are progressing. I think that the House owes a debt of gratitude to all the emergency services, and we will do everything we can to get supplies restored as quickly as possible.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in sending my condolences to the families of Lance-Corporal Timothy Flowers and Senior Aircraftsmen Matthew Caulwell, Christopher Dunsmore and Peter McFerran, all of whom were killed in Iraq. Their deaths are a reminder of the daily sacrifices that our young men and women are making on our behalf, and we honour their memory.

I join the Prime Minister and the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) in praising the emergency services and local councils for the vital work that they are doing in dealing with the floods. The sympathy of the whole House will go out to those who have lost loved ones, those who have been flooded out or evacuated, and those who have had property damaged or lost.

Looking to the future and how we minimise the risk of future flooding, at least five times in the past decade the House has been told that co-ordination between the Environment Agency and local councils needs to improve. I welcome the review that the Prime Minister has set up. Can he confirm that it will look into co-ordination to ensure that this time it really is delivered, and will he ensure that we do everything possible to protect key infrastructure in the future?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I hope that the whole House will agree on our thanks to all the emergency services. I have seen at first hand the superb work they are doing, and I look forward to meeting them later today. I also agree that the sympathies that go out to those who have been disconnected and those who are without vital supplies are shared by the whole House. We will have to consider what is to happen in the future. Of course, the main thing at the moment is to make people secure, to prevent any further incidents, and to do what we can to give people the supplies that they need.

The review was set up as a result of what happened in Yorkshire and Humberside. It is to help us to understand why the flooding has been so extensive and why we are seeing such extreme weather conditions, but also to learn lessons for the future. The siting of infrastructure is one issue that I think that the right hon. Gentleman will agree about; the provision of supplies for dealing with floods is another. Drainage is an issue that has become particularly relevant because of what is happening on the roads. All those issues will be investigated in full, and I believe that the report that he will see when it comes out later this year will be extensive in considering both what has happened and what needs to be done. I hope that there will be an all-party consensus that we need to invest more in preventing floods in the future.

Mr. Cameron: I am grateful for that answer. However, there is a specific question that some local councils are asking about the compensation that they will receive—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman should be heard.

Mr. Cameron: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. People in this country are discussing these issues and they want these questions asked and answered.

Local councils are asking a specific question about the compensation that they will receive for the money that they spend on flood relief. They welcome the improvements that have taken place in the funding formula. The Prime Minister has said that there will be 100 per cent. relief, but the formula still requires councils to fund the first part of the bill, which can, in some cases, run into millions of pounds. So does 100 per cent. really mean 100 per cent.?

The Prime Minister: Under the Bellwin formula, it used to be 85 per cent. of costs recovered; it is now 100 per cent. as a result of an announcement that we made because of what happened in Yorkshire and Humberside, and that is extended to all the areas affected now. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary announced that the fund that was set up for Yorkshire and Humberside will be extended from £10 million to £20 million so that local authorities can make further claims where they face difficulties. I can also say that in addition, along with funding from the Department for Children, Schools

and Families and the regional development agencies, the total funding available for Yorkshire and Humberside, and to deal with what is happening in the areas we are visiting today, will be £46 million in total. We have substantially raised the funds available so that local authorities are in a better position to respond.

In addition to that, we shall have to look at the infrastructure needs for the future, which will be a matter for the inquiry set up by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In the immediate term, £46 million will be made available; in the longer run, we have to look at what we have to do to improve our infrastructure. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, expenditure on flood defences is being increased from £300 million to £600 million, and it will reach £800 million by 2011. I hope, again, that all parties will support that.

Mr. Cameron: The focus in some parts of the country is now shifting from emergency response to clean-up. Can the Prime Minister tell us what steps the Government will take to make sure that the insurance companies pay up rapidly? Many people who do not have insurance will find their homes ruined and be left with little or nothing. Some local hardship funds are being set up, but is the Prime Minister satisfied that they are extensive enough to cover all the affected areas?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman because his question allows me to explain that we have been talking to the insurance companies. They are in a position to act quickly, and we are urging them to do so. As for people who are uninsured, part of the reason why we are funding local authorities with the additional £20 million is to enable them to help people who are in particular difficulties. In addition, there are crisis grants and community care grants, and I know that money has already been paid out in Yorkshire and Humberside. We will do what we can to help people to get their insurance payments as quickly as possible, and to help the uninsured. Again, I hope that all parties want to make sure that people insure for the future and, at the same time, that insurance companies pay up quickly.

Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch, East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the very serious situation facing broadcasters in this country, with the revelations last week from the BBC, and this morning's resignation by the head of GMTV. Will he hold urgent talks with Ofcom and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in an attempt to restore public faith in broadcasters?

The Prime Minister: This is a very serious matter, because it affects people's confidence in television stations. Those people who are running competitions and telephone lines rely on the general public having confidence in what they are doing. I will certainly have the talks that my hon. Friend suggests, but it is a matter for those authorities to sort out, and they should do it quickly.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): Once again, I associate myself with the expressions of condolence and sympathy that we have just heard from the Prime Minister, and like him, I wish to pay tribute to the local authorities, the armed services and the emergency services, some of whose work I have seen for myself.

The Prime Minister acknowledged the importance of infrastructure, particularly water treatment plants and power stations. In the review to which he has referred, set up by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, will there be a detailed assessment of the precautions available to all such infrastructural facilities throughout the country, and not just those in the areas affected during the past few weeks?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman because that is exactly what we have to do. If we are dealing with extreme weather conditions, as we are, and if we are dealing with the situation that we found in Yorkshire and Humberside, and particularly in Gloucester, where a month's rain fell within an hour, we have to look at whether the precautions we have taken in the past are satisfactory, whether infrastructure is sited in the right place, and whether drainage arrangements made in the 19th and 20th centuries are suitable for 21st century conditions. I assure him that the review has sufficiently wide terms of reference—I could read them out, but I shall pass them on to him—for all these issues to be looked at. But again, all parties will have to agree that further expenditure on infrastructure will be necessary, and that it will be a public expenditure requirement for the country.

Sir Menzies Campbell: The Prime Minister was responsible for the establishment of the Stern review, which he will recall pointed out the severe economic consequences of climate change. Is it not clear from the events of the past few weeks that we cannot afford not to take the necessary steps, or, indeed, not to spend the necessary money, to mitigate the effects of climate change?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right. The Stern report, which the Treasury commissioned, said that global warming is very likely to intensify the water cycle and increase the risk of floods. It is an accepted part of the Stern recommendations that we have to do more. We have increased expenditure on flood defences from £300 million to £600 million. We will increase that to £800 million in the next few years. We will ensure that the necessary investment is made and, if the review reports that we need to do more, we will put it to the House of Commons that we should spend more to ensure that our infrastructure is properly equipped to deal with emergencies such as those that we have experienced.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows that bingo clubs throughout the country provide a safe form of entertainment for many thousands of our constituents. However, due to a combination of factors, including the smoking ban, the removal of amusement games and the high taxation that bingo clubs face, 21 clubs have already closed in Scotland alone. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and representatives of the industry to ascertain whether we can find a way forward, especially through value added tax, to try to preserve as many of our bingo clubs as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have looked at the issue from time to time. I realise that he is passing judgment on a former Chancellor of the Exchequer when he makes his comments about what has happened to the taxation of bingo. I assure him that the current Chancellor will continue to consider those matters and that I too am happy to meet him to discuss them.

Q2. [152111] **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West) (Con): Was the Prime Minister's predecessor right to give up £7 billion of Britain's EU rebate?

The Prime Minister: The agreement that we got on the budget is good for Britain. It means that we will make a proper contribution—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let the Prime Minister speak.

The Prime Minister: I am sorry that Conservative Members do not want to support the enlargement of the European Union, which is the reason why the budget was adjusted. It was right to do that in the interests of supporting the economic development of eastern Europe. I believe that we got a good settlement for the country and that, when the House debates it in detail, Conservative Members will see that it is a good settlement for the country. I hope that, from the hon. Gentleman's new position of freedom on the Back Benches, he might be able to support us.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows that, today in Britain, 4,000 children live in care establishments and long to live in family homes with parents. What are the Government doing about that?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which is very much part of the spending review that we are undertaking so that we can do more for children in the establishments that she mentioned and recognise their needs. I believe that all parties accept that we undervalued what we needed to do in the past. The review that is taking place will make for better policy for the future. I am happy to talk to my hon. Friend about those issues so that we can agree on a proper way forward.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): This morning, the Prime Minister said in an interview about the EU constitution—*[Interruption.]* There is plenty more. He said:

"if I thought I was doing something that needed a referendum I would say so."

The Irish Prime Minister says that 90 per cent. of the constitution remains in the treaty and the Spanish Foreign Minister says that 98 per cent. remains. What figure would the Prime Minister put on it? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Leader of the Opposition is entitled to be heard. I have said it before and I will say it again: I do not want a Whip at my side shouting. It is the last thing I want.

Mr. Cameron: I have a simple question for the Prime Minister: if the Spanish Foreign Minister cites 98 per cent. and the Irish Prime Minister cites 90 per cent., what is his figure?

The Prime Minister: I see, Mr. Speaker, that we are quickly back to the old agenda. I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that, if he examines each aspect of the treaty and what we secured in our negotiations, he should support it, not oppose it. The first issue is the charter of rights—it is non-justiciable in British law, so we secured our negotiating objective. The second is justice and home affairs—we have an opt-in, so we secured our negotiating objective. The third issue is security, foreign affairs and defence policy, which remains intergovernmental, so we secured our objective. The fourth is social security—no expenditure affecting us will be made without an emergency brake that we can put on, so we secured our negotiating objective. National security will remain a matter for individual Governments, so we secured our negotiating objective. He might be better off, in the interests of unity within his own party, looking at what the chair of his democracy taskforce said only a few days ago. He said that, as a result of what we had negotiated, a European referendum would be "crackpot", "dotty" and "frankly absurd".

Mr. Cameron: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to trade quotations from former Chancellors, I can tell him about a former Chancellor who promised a referendum and who put it in his manifesto. That former Chancellor is him. He talks about his red lines, but he had red lines with the constitution, and they are pretty much the same red lines. That is why the man who wrote the constitution says that the changes have been few and far between. That is why the President of the Commission is going round saying that it will usher in

"the world's first non-imperial empire".

Mr. Giscard d'Estaing says that more than 90 per cent. remains and Jean-Luc Dehaene, the former Prime Minister of Belgium, says that the figure is 95 per cent., so which is it? The Prime Minister claims to be a numbers man, so is it 90 per cent., is it 95 per cent. or is it 98 per cent.? Come on.

The Prime Minister: Let me just read from the mandate agreed at the Council:

"The constitutional concept, which consisted in repealing all existing Treaties and replacing them by a single text called 'Constitution', is abandoned."

That was the decision made at the intergovernmental conference in Brussels. The Conservative party should recognise that that was achieved and that all our negotiating objectives, including the opt-outs, so that the charter is non-justiciable in English and British law, were also achieved. The Conservative party has got to wake up to the fact that we succeed when we negotiate in Europe, and we do not need to have an empty chair.

Mr. Cameron: Why does the Prime Minister not wake up and read this quotation from his trade Minister? He said:

"This is a con to call this a treaty; it's not. It's exactly the same: it's a constitution."

That is the man whom the Prime Minister put in the House of Lords as his trade Minister. The right hon. Gentleman says that he wants to restore trust in a Government that he has been part of for 10 years; he says that he wants to involve people in the decisions affecting their lives; and he says that he wants the state

to be the servant not the master. Yet on the key test of whether to honour the commitment that he personally gave to hold a referendum, he has failed. Why is he afraid to trust the people and hold that referendum?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is back to the old agenda. It did not take long after the Ealing, Southall by-election for him to retreat—the old agenda on Europe, the old agenda on grammar schools, the old agenda on spending and the old agenda on tax cuts. The wheels are falling off the Tory bicycle, and it is just as well that he has got a car following him when he goes out on his rounds. Let me just quote what his old friend Lord Kalms has said to him:

"We're having a very bad period."

He said that they needed to do some rethinking and that

"Some of the policies need substantial working on."

He continued:

"What we should do is pack up",

go to our constituencies,

"and come back in the autumn"

and rethink. That is what the Tories have got to do.

Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging Royal Mail to enter into meaningful discussions with the Communication Workers Union and thus ensure that the jobs and the good pay and conditions of Royal Mail employees, such as those at Mount Pleasant sorting office in my constituency, are protected?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we want decent pay for all workers in this country, but we must also tackle inflation, and people have to accept settlements that will ensure that inflation is low in the years to come. While I want to see justice for every low-paid worker in this country, we have to remember that if we do not win the battle against inflation, we will have a bigger problem next year or the year after. That is why I believe that all workers should look at pay settlements as a means by which we can conquer inflation over the next few months.

Q3. [152112] **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Given the warnings from the Chief of the General Staff at the weekend that the Army was out of reserves, and given that the Defence Select Committee heard yesterday that more than 90 per cent of terrorist attacks in Basra are now being perpetrated on British forces, is it not time to bring the British forces out of Iraq and to concentrate our efforts on Afghanistan, which the west neglected by rushing to war in Iraq on a false prospectus?

The Prime Minister: We will meet our responsibilities in Iraq. They are responsibilities in relation to the United Nations and to the new, democratic Iraqi Government. We have reduced the number of troops from 44,000 to 5,500, and in three provinces we have moved from a combat role to an overwatch role. We will have to make a decision about moving to an overwatch role in a fourth province. I do not think that we would be doing the Iraqi Government or our commitments to the United Nations any service by setting an artificial timetable now.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman, however, that we must support the effort in Afghanistan. It is the front line against the Taliban, and this is where we would like to see greater burden sharing by all our NATO and other allies. It is also where our Army and our defence forces are doing an excellent job, as they are in Iraq. Where the Army and the defence forces ask for extra and new equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is being provided. We have already spent £0.75 billion on updating the equipment that is available to the forces, and, in Afghanistan in particular, I was able to announce new helicopters for our forces for this year and next year. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that, when it comes to the provision of equipment to deal with these emergencies, we have been forthcoming in providing the resources necessary.

Q4. [152113] **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): Holly Davenport from Wakefield was just five years old when she suffered burns to 50 per cent. of her body after falling into a scalding hot bath. Each year, 600 people suffer the same terrible fate as Holly, three quarters of whom are children under five. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and the "Hot water burns like fire" coalition, so that we can impress upon him the need to change the law to enable the installation of thermostatic mixing valves on the baths in the 3 million new homes that we are going to build over the next 13 years, to protect the most vulnerable in our society?

The Prime Minister: I want to praise my hon. Friend's campaign on behalf of her constituents in the light of the terrible damage and injuries that have been inflicted. We share her concern to do everything that we can to minimise scalding as a result of failures in hot water systems. We are working closely with the industry to provide guidance and training to those who install and maintain hot water systems, and to review building regulations, which are important in regard to determining what further action is necessary. I shall be happy to meet my hon. Friend and her campaigners to talk about these issues.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Today, a Scottish opinion survey shows the standing of the Prime Minister trumped by that of the Scottish National party Scottish Government. May I ask the Prime Minister to turn this around? Who is he supporting as the next leader of the Labour party in Scotland, or is he standing behind Jack McConnell?

The Prime Minister: The former First Minister has done an excellent job for Scotland. During his period in office, and those of his predecessors, 250,000 jobs were created in Scotland. I believe that the state of the Scottish economy is due in no small part to the work of this Government with the Labour Scottish Administration, when they were in power. I hope that the hon. Gentleman's party will do nothing to damage the economic record that has brought such prosperity to Scotland.

Q5. [152114] **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend commit to boosting UK manufacturing by making a commitment to the new aircraft carriers that are much needed by the Royal Navy, and by ensuring that those platforms will have

UK-built aircraft? If the joint strike fighter transfer does not go ahead, will he ensure that the Typhoon operates from those carriers?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has always taken an interest in the ordering of aircraft carriers. The announcement on them is being eagerly awaited in Portsmouth, Glasgow, Rosyth and Barrow and, indeed, throughout the UK maritime industry. This is a major project for the future of the shipbuilding industry, and a major addition to the strategic strength of the Royal Navy, and I hope that he will be pleased by the announcement that the Defence Secretary is going to make in a few minutes.

Q6. [152115] **Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory** (Wells) (Con): The Government's first election manifesto outlined plans for Scotland and stated:

"The Union will be strengthened and the threat of separatism removed."

Given that we now have a separatist leader of the Scottish Executive and given the increasing resentment in England about the imbalance in funding and voting between Scotland and England, what positive proposals does the Prime Minister have for dealing with that—or is he just in denial?

The Prime Minister: I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that in both the Scottish and Welsh elections, nearly 70 per cent. of voters voted against separatist parties. Even after the elections that he referred to, there is no majority for separation and no majority for independence in either Scotland or Wales. I would have thought that the Conservative party had learned its lesson on these issues. When the leader of the Conservative party is in Scotland, he says that he supports devolution wholeheartedly, but when he is in England, he says that he has doubts about whether it should happen at all. *[Interruption.]* Oh yes. I believe that the Conservative party should make up its mind and support the Union and devolution.

Q7. [152116] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Is it fair that 1.8 million children in this country grow up in poverty because they live in a household where nobody works? That is the single biggest issue in my constituency and the Rhondda. Is it not time that we did far more to ensure that every child gets an opportunity in life, and that we got more people off benefits and into work, so that we could break the vicious circle whereby poverty cascades down through the generations?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When the employment figures were published last week, 29 million people were in work—2.5 million more than in 1997. That is as a result of the new deal—opposed by the Conservative party; the minimum wage—opposed by the Conservative party; and new measures in public expenditure—opposed by the Conservative party. We will continue to do the right thing to create jobs in this country.

National Security

12.32 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I shall make a statement. On 29 and 30 June, the professionalism, vigilance and courage of our police and our security and emergency services thwarted a conspiracy to murder and maim British citizens. Britain—led by London and Glasgow—stood firm in the face of threats. Our calmness and steadfastness as a nation sent a powerful message across the world that we will not yield to terrorism, or ever be intimidated by it.

Those events were the 15th attempted terrorist plot on British soil since 2001. As previously set out, the police and security services are currently having to contend with around 30 known plots, and monitor more than 200 groupings or networks and about 2,000 individuals. I think that the whole House will agree that our country—and all countries—has to confront a generation-long challenge to defeat al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist violence.

In recognition of that continuing long-term threat, we have created, among other things, a new national security committee to oversee the new office for security and counter-terrorism. Following the first meetings of the national security committee, I want to report on changes that we now recommend.

First, let me confirm to the House that in future we will publish a national security strategy, and that the first will be published and presented in the autumn to Parliament for debate and decision in this House. At the time of the spending review, we will announce a single security budget for our country. In line with the Butler report, we will separate the position of chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee from policy adviser to the Government. Thus, the sole responsibilities of the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee will be to provide Ministers with assessments that have been formulated independently of the political process and to improve across Government the effectiveness of intelligence analysis.

Today, I am also publishing the Intelligence and Security Committee report on rendition and the Government are consulting on how in future the ISC should be appointed and should report to Parliament—where possible, with hearings in public, a strengthened capacity for investigations, reports that are subject to more parliamentary debate and greater transparency over appointments to the Committee.

To strengthen the counter-terrorist capability of the police and security services, we have, since 11 September, doubled our overall investment to more than £2 billion a year. Dedicated anti-terrorist resources have also doubled. Even in advance of the spending review settlement for future years, the Security Service will, by next year, be twice the size it was in 2001.

The protection and resilience of our major infrastructure and crowded places requires continuous vigilance. I can confirm that over 900 shopping centres, sports stadiums and venues where people congregate have been assessed by counter-terrorism security advisers, over 10,000 premises have been given updated security advice, and the police will continue high-visibility patrols.

The counter-terrorism Bill will also include a new power allowing the Secretary of State to ensure additional protection for key utility sites. We have asked Lord West to oversee, over this summer, a further overview of how best we protect crowded places and our buildings and national infrastructure, from roads, railways and tunnels to bridges, water systems and utilities.

Since 1997, the Government have given the police new resources and Parliament has provided new legal powers to arrest and try terrorists. Thanks to the hard work, dedication and commitment of the men and women in the police, security and intelligence services and the prosecuting authorities, this year alone, in nine cases, a total of 30 individuals have been convicted. The forthcoming counter-terrorism Bill will propose additional penalties for terrorists charged with other criminal offences.

Our first line of defence against terrorism is overseas at other countries' ports and airports where people embark on journeys to our country and from where embassies issue visas. To protect us in routes and places where there is the greatest threat of harm, I believe that we now need to accelerate our plans, completing the move from old and ineffective paper-based systems to real-time monitoring, which will allow us to act immediately and in a co-ordinated way across immigration, police, and intelligence.

The way forward is electronic screening of all passengers as they check in and out of the country at ports and airports, so that terrorist suspects can be identified and stopped before they board planes, trains and boats to the United Kingdom. After a review of counter-terrorism screening, and as part of the overall spending settlement for security to be set out in the autumn, the Home Secretary will enhance the existing e-borders programme to incorporate all passenger information to help to track and intercept terrorists and criminals, as well as, of course, illegal immigrants.

While new biometric visas are already in place for immigrants from high-risk countries, I can confirm that within nine months—from March next year—we will extend biometric visas to all visa applicants. From 2009, we will introduce a new, enhanced system of electronic exit control, linking the checking of passports to checking against the warnings index.

The second line of defence is at our borders, where biometrics—not just fingerprints but iris recognition—are already in use. To strengthen the powers and surveillance capability of our border guards and security officers, we will now integrate the vital work of the Border and Immigration Agency, Customs and UKvisas overseas and at the main points of entry to the UK, and we will establish a unified border force.

I have asked the Cabinet Secretary to report back by October on the stages ahead in implementation and whether there is a case for going further while ensuring value for money, but as a result of our announcement today, the first change that people will see is that, starting from next month when arriving in Britain, they will be met at the border—either sea port or airport—by a highly visible, uniformed presence, as

[The Prime Minister]

over the next period we move, for the first time, to one single primary checkpoint for both passport control and customs.

But this, our second line of defence, has also to be complemented by a third line of defence—ID security within our own borders. While for UK citizens the first biometric ID cards will start during 2009, from the end of 2008 any foreign nationals coming to the UK for more than six months will be required to have a biometric ID. Such an identity scheme will help to prevent people already in the country from using multiple identities for terrorist, criminal or other purposes.

In the identification of potential terrorist suspects, there should also be maximum co-operation internationally, with maximum possible use made of alerts and watch lists. While Lord West's review has found no systematic failings in our procedures for checking potential suspects, it has highlighted the importance of enhancing existing co-operation to share more information between police and immigration services and internationally across countries: within the European Union, to enable British law enforcement authorities to access immigration information on existing European Union databases; bilaterally with other member states, mutually to exchange information; and joining up criminal records databases throughout the EU, so that our authorities can quickly identify individuals who are charged with crimes, no matter where in Europe they are convicted. At a cost of £5 million, we will link the UK watch list to the Interpol database of lost and stolen documents.

In addition to the nine foreign nationals recently deported under immigration powers on grounds of national security, a further 21 foreign nationals are currently subject to deportation proceedings on national security grounds. On the same grounds, we are preventing 124 individuals from coming to our country and refusing to admit another 52 for glorifying terrorism or other unacceptable behaviour. Overall, 4,000 foreign prisoners are likely to be deported from our country this year. We have agreed repatriation arrangements with Jordan, Libya, Lebanon and Algeria, and we will now press ahead to sign more agreements.

Liberty is the first and founding value of our country, and security is the first duty of Government. The British way is that every measure we take to enhance security is complemented by additional protections against any arbitrary treatment and in defence of the liberties of the individual. We want to consult widely, and we seek—and look forward to obtaining—an all-party consensus on how we treat intercept evidence and on new provisions for pre-charge detention and post-charge questioning. The independent and cross-party review into the use of intercept as evidence in court will be led by Sir John Chilcot, and its members will include the Privy Councillors Lord Archer of Sandwell, Lord Hurd and the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith).

While it is already a criminal offence to seek training for terrorism overseas or in this country, we will consult on tightening bail conditions, and in particular on restriction of travel, in any cases where people are suspected of complicity in terrorism. We have in place a regime that allows pre-charge detention for up to 28 days. There is general agreement that the circumstances in which the police might need to go beyond even 14 days will be rare, and that will be subject to special procedures of both judicial oversight and parliamentary accountability. I detect that there is also a growing weight of opinion—including from Lord Carlile, the independent reviewer of anti-terrorism legislation—that there might be some circumstances in which detention beyond 28 days is necessary, such as if the police have to intervene early to avert an attack, if huge quantities of material evidence need to be analysed, or if assistance from other countries is necessary.

The 2005 case cited in previous debates on this issue involved investigation of some 60 mobile phones, 268 computers, and 920 DVDs. However, the airline investigation last August involved 200 mobile phones, 400 computers, 8,000 CDs, DVDs and other discs containing 6,000 gigabytes of data, almost 70 premises searches, and inquiries across three continents. Another case involved 3,000 statements, the examination of 6,000 documents, more than 8,000 exhibits and inquiries across nine countries. During the recent period—I must make this clear to Members, in the light of a radio debate this morning—six people had to be held for 27 or 28 days.

While one of our proposals, which enjoys broad support, to allow post-charge questioning for the explicit purpose of securing evidence in a terrorism trial will reduce the risk that we will need to go beyond 28 days, the Home Affairs Committee concluded that that step will not entirely eliminate the risk. It is right to explore whether a consensus can be built on the most measured way to deal with the remaining risk. I hope that Members will agree that we should not return to the previous proposal rejected by the House, but I also hope that they will agree that there must be a maximum limit—and that that should be set by Parliament.

We today put forward four options for consultation over the coming months. One proposal that we cite in the consultation document from Liberty, to which we are grateful for engaging constructively in the debate, is that if this risk materialises, we should declare an emergency under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and allow for a period beyond the 28-day limit, for up to a further 30 days, although that would require the declaration of a state of emergency. We are also proposing for consultation—this would not require a state of emergency—an extension of the current limit for up to 28 days more or a lesser period but only if, in addition to the requirement that a judge must approve every seven-day extension, the case is notified to Parliament and subject to a timely report to it of all circumstances, and with the option of a later parliamentary debate.

This therefore means that any extension would be subject not only to a specific case being made by the Director of Public Prosecutions, subject every seven days, up to the agreed limit, to the approval of a High Court judge, and subject to the regular report of the independent reviewer, with an annual debate in Parliament but, in each and every instance, to a specific parliamentary notification procedure, to a further statement to Parliament on the individual case, and to a review of the specific case by the independent reviewer, with the provision for this House to scrutinise and debate the report and all the circumstances.

More important even than consensus here in the House is the consensus that we seek in all communities across the country. Since the attacks of 7 July 2005, communities in Britain and across the world have come together in a common front against terrorism and against the propaganda that fuels it. This requires not just the security measures we are outlining today, but that we work with all communities—and, indeed, all countries—through debate, discussion, dialogue and education as we tackle at root the evils that risk driving people, particularly vulnerable young people, into the hands of violent extremists. Here, schools, colleges, universities, civil society, faith groups—indeed, every institution in our country—have a part to play.

Last week, President Sarkozy of France and I agreed to propose the formation of a joint working group with Germany and other countries to share our experiences and develop ways to expose and defeat terrorism. We will report later this year on this work, but we can make a start today. Over the next three years, we will provide an additional £70 million for local authorities and community groups to improve the capacity of local communities in our country to resist violent extremism. This will include developing leadership programmes for young people, strengthening the capacity of women's groups, and local projects to build citizenship. There are perhaps as many as 1,000 madrassahs in Britain, educating more than 50,000 to 100,000 young people in after-school classes. In Bradford, an agreement was reached to include citizenship education in their curriculum, and we will now offer to work with other communities on similar programmes.

We will also support a new skills qualification in citizenship and community cohesion for faith leaders. We will sponsor English-speaking imams and propose inter-faith bodies for every community in the country to build greater understanding. We will update guidance to universities before the autumn on how they can do more to protect the safety and security of vulnerable young people in particular. I can also confirm funding for a BBC Arabic channel, and an editorially independent Farsi TV channel that will broadcast to the people of Iran. Following further discussion on these and other issues, the Government will report back to Parliament on further measures that can isolate extremists who preach and practise terrorism.

Our priority as a Government is a Britain strong in security, robust in our resolve and resilient in response, so that as a nation we both defeat terrorism and isolate violent extremism, wherever we confront it and whatever its support. I hope that in doing so, an all-party consensus that will extend into every community of this country is possible, so that together we can create a stronger, safer and more cohesive United Kingdom. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and I very much agree with what he said in praising the police, the security services and the public for what they did to combat those terrorist attacks. This is an area, of course, where we can and will work together. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that the threat we face from terrorism today is of a different order from the threats we faced in the past? It requires tough, consistent and rigorous action at every level: intelligence and surveillance, tackling extremism, effective policing—including at our borders—and taking all the public with us. It is not just about passing new laws.

On intercept evidence, I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has accepted our proposal for a Privy Council committee. Will he pledge to legislate immediately if the committee can find a way to lift the ban on the use of this vital evidence in court? We welcome the single security budget, but can he confirm whether spending for special branch, which carries out much of the vital surveillance work done around the country, is included in that budget, because that urgently needs to expand?

When the right hon. Gentleman was Chancellor of the Exchequer, he took the decision to freeze the Home Office budget. Now that that Department has been split in two and he has become Prime Minister, will he revisit that decision?

One of our major concerns on ID cards is that costs are spiralling and the project's effectiveness is being widely questioned. Does the Prime Minister agree that the money could be better spent to bolster security and public safety elsewhere?

I am delighted that the Prime Minister has finally adopted our policy of a border police force, about which I have been asking him since he became Prime Minister. The immigration Minister has described that policy as damaging, disruptive and distracting, and the Prime Minister and others said that all the way through the election campaign. I am pleased that the Prime Minister now agrees with us and that questions from this Dispatch Box result in action from the Government.

The commission that I set up under Lord Stevens includes the former chief inspector of constabulary and the current head of the British Transport police. Their work is well under way. In order to prepare the policy quickly, will the Prime Minister consider turning the commission into a Government commission, with Opposition involvement, so that we may implement the policy properly and ensure that it is a proper border police force?

On tackling extremism, the Prime Minister has said little about controls on terror suspects travelling abroad. Can he tell us today whether he is considering new laws? Does he agree with me that we should be using intelligence, surveillance and co-ordination to ensure that everything possible is done to break terror networks between this country, Pakistan and the middle east?

On Hizb ut-Tahrir, I ask him again why there is still no ban. It is banned not only in Sweden and Germany, but in Egypt and Pakistan. The fact is that two years ago the then Prime Minister did not say that he would look into banning that group, that he would review it or that he would consider it: he said that he would do it. Why cannot the Prime Minister make the same pledge today?

Another promise made two years ago was to deport those using websites to incite hatred and extremism. Will the Prime Minister confirm that since then only one person has been deported under those specific provisions?

[Mr. David Cameron]

On the issue of winning hearts and minds, the Prime Minister said much with which I agree, and we both agree that not enough is done today to integrate new arrivals into our country. We welcome what he has said, but will some of the extra money be used to reverse the cuts in funding English language teaching, which is so vital for the proper integration of new arrivals?

Turning to the issue of further legislation, will the Prime Minister confirm that seven people who have been given control orders have absconded? May I welcome the decision finally to take up our proposal of allowing the questioning of suspects after they have been charged? Is not that the most important way of ensuring that the police can get on with their job without introducing something that could, if we were not very careful, start to look like a form of internment?

That brings me to the issue of 28 days. We will look at the Prime Minister's consultation papers very carefully. I have to say that we have seen the point before about the volume of evidence that needs to be gathered. What specifically in the paper today amounts to new evidence? In particular, what evidence does he have that was not available in December, because it was then that the then Home Secretary, Attorney-General and Lord Chancellor agreed that fresh evidence was needed before any further change could be justified?

Rather than passing a new law, will the Prime Minister look carefully at our proposal—and Liberty's—to use the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which gives the Government power to detain people for an additional 30 days in time of national emergency. That would make a total of 58 days, two more than the Prime Minister has talked about, without the need to introduce a new, repressive law. The Prime Minister said in his statement that the problem is the need to declare a state of emergency, but if there was a multiple attack on our country and those powers were needed because of the pressures on the police, it would indeed be a state of emergency. Should not this House ask that Ministers prove that all existing laws are being used before they reach for new legislation?

Will the Prime Minister recognise that all the actions necessary—better use of intelligence, stronger policing, cracking down on extremists or passing the necessary laws—may come to nothing unless he is prepared to take a tough and hard-headed look at the Human Rights Act 1998? It is not just me saying that: the previous Prime Minister said that it needed reform and the previous Lord Chancellor said that there were problems with it. Will the Prime Minister now admit that the Act is frustrating our fight against terrorism? Will he work with me to draw up a proper Bill of Rights that protects our liberty and our security? Vitally, do the Government understand that what is needed to defeat terrorism is the hard-nosed defence of liberty, and we must avoid any approach that lapses into ineffective authoritarianism?

Finally, will the Prime Minister welcome with me the fact that with a border police, intercept evidence, questions after charge and a national security council, my party is playing a key role in setting the agenda in making our country safe?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support for the individual policies that we have put forward. The support that he has indicated for the work of the emergency, police and security services is appreciated across the House. I know that his support for the bravery in the face of violence of the people involved in the incidents in June was much appreciated at the time.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we have to do more on hearts and minds, and to integrate people who have come to our country. We need to look at what is happening in some communities to see how we can bind people closer together. I agree that if we could reach a conclusion on the intercept inquiry, we should legislate as quickly as possible. I am glad that there is now all-party agreement on the issue of post-charge questioning.

The border force will be a unified border force that combines the work of the Border and Immigration Agency, Customs and UKvisas at all the main points of entry. It will be a single, uniformed presence and a single checkpoint for passengers. There will be new borders officers, with immigration, Customs and police powers to investigate and detain people suspected of immigration, customs or criminal offences, all reporting to the head of the Border and Immigration Agency. As people come into a port or airport, they will see one single, uniformed presence.

The right hon. Gentleman's other proposals will be investigated in the Cabinet Secretary's review, but what we propose today can be implemented very quickly and people will soon see that uniformed presence at ports. If it is not exactly the same as the right hon. Gentleman's proposal, work will be done to consider other measures he wishes to propose. I believe that it is important that we move ahead now with the unified border force that I propose, and the details are made clear in the documents.

On the issue of 28 days, Parliament is at its best when we discover common ground. It is common ground that there may be circumstances in which the police are justified in asking to go beyond 28 days. Over the course of the last few years, whatever the debates on 90 days or on this allegation or that, the Government and the official Opposition have come to the view that there may be circumstances in which more than 28 days is necessary. I hope that the Liberal party and the other parties will say that they also agree with that case. Therefore, in the rare circumstances in which the police will ask to go beyond 28 days, the question will be what we should do.

The Leader of the Opposition asked if there was new evidence that we could bring to bear since the publication of previous discussions. He agrees that we are dealing with a unique set of circumstances. International terrorists wish to maim or murder indiscriminately as many people as possible. In some cases, they are suicide bombers who have no fear for their own safety, but simply wish to inflict the maximum damage. They also seek to achieve a propaganda effect.

The new evidence is that in six cases in recent times the police have had to go to 27 or 28 days. The new evidence contained in the document before the House is simply the number of exhibits and items for investigation and the number of countries that have to

be involved in an investigation before charges can be properly laid. The ricin case involved 26 countries. One ricin-related operation involved 800 passports and 2,500 forged documents. In some of the cases, thousands of documents are involved that are eventually put before the court. That is why the police have said that it is their view that they need more than 28 days.

I accept that we are talking about rare and unusual circumstances, and that it is not a power that we would wish to use other than in the rarest of circumstances. However, if we agree that we will go beyond 28 days in certain circumstances, by what mechanism can we justify to ourselves that the situation is rare, and how can we ensure that there is proper judicial oversight and parliamentary accountability? Those are the questions that we must ask.

I have looked at the proposal from Liberty to which the shadow Home Secretary has given some support. It suggests that a state of emergency would be declared, under the civil contingencies legislation—but do Opposition politicians believe that the declaration of a state of emergency in the circumstances that we have been talking about would not send out a message about how we deal with things in this country that is exactly the opposite of the message that we want to send out?

However, I do accept that there should be a special parliamentary procedure if we go beyond 28 days. Therefore, I ask the Opposition to consider in detail—and obviously there can be cross-party talks on these matters—what we propose as an alternative. We are talking about rare circumstances, and in some cases the parliamentary power that we propose would not be used in any one year. Therefore, would it not be better to ask the Home Secretary to make a parliamentary notification about what has happened and prepare a report that would come to Parliament? In each case, moreover, the independent reviewer would be asked to prepare a report for Parliament as a whole and not just for the Home Secretary. Parliament would then be in a position to debate the matter in full, if it chose to do so.

It seems to me that what the Opposition parties and Liberty have suggested may be a way forward is better dealt with by the notification procedure, by the requirement on the Home Secretary to give a report, by the requirement that, if it is thought necessary, the House will have a debate on the matter, and by the requirement that the independent reviewer prepare a report in each and every circumstance.

I hope that we can have a full debate over the summer months on this and the two other proposals that have been made, in addition to the one from Liberty. I am as anxious as other people in this House that we as a nation can move forward with a united agreement on this matter. Such a consensus would serve this House well. I believe that we can find a solution to this problem if we have a debate and dialogue about it that allows people to listen to all sides of the argument.

The Leader of the Opposition asked about two other things. On Hizb ut-Tahrir—*[Interruption.]* In fact, the right hon. Gentleman is the last person to have corresponded by letter with Hizb ut-Tahrir, when he thanked it. However, what I say to him is that we must look at the evidence in every single case. We must be aware that when we proscribe an organisation, that should not be overturned on appeal. It is therefore necessary that we look in detail at all the evidence, and that is what I said to him that I would do. I asked the right hon. Gentleman whether he wished to provide me with any new evidence, and he is certainly welcome to do so over the next period of time.

As to whether a Bill of Rights is the answer to the problems of deportation, we accept that, when it is difficult to deport an individual from this country, control orders are not just the second best way to deal with the problem, but the third best too. The Government have always made it clear that that is not our preferred route, but the Leader of the Opposition has to look very carefully at the constitutional position that he is taking on this matter. On "The Westminster Hour" last year, his shadow Attorney-General was asked whether a British Bill of Rights

> "would be drawn up to make it easier to deport suspected terrorists to countries which might torture them, would it?"

The answer was:

> "No, I don't think it would...It would be quite wrong to suggest it would completely transform the situation."

In the spirit of debate and dialogue, I ask the Leader of the Opposition not to give people the impression that if he accepts the European convention on human rights, he can find an easy way round the problem of deportation by simply adopting a British Bill of Rights. Let us debate the matter in such a way that we understand the difficulties and work through them, rather than giving people the impression that a solution can be found simply by announcing a new piece of legislation that we know might not have the intended effect.

Otherwise, I feel that there is scope for consensus in other areas. I hope that, over the summer and autumn months, there will be discussions between the parties, led by the Home Secretary, about how we can work together on all the major issues to defeat what everyone agrees is the great issue of our generation. We must ensure that terrorist violence will not flourish, and that it will never intimidate this country.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): The Prime Minister was right to begin with a tribute to those who had a hand in thwarting the terrorist efforts of 29 and 30 June. He might also have mentioned the members of the public who behaved with conspicuous gallantry, especially at Glasgow airport. I hope that there may some way to recognise their bravery formally, in a way to which we are accustomed.

The Prime Minister's statement contained a great deal of detail, and we shall obviously consider it very carefully indeed. We have heard some of what has been said today before, but some of it is undoubtedly new. One thing that should be welcomed unequivocally is the rearrangement of responsibilities with regard to the Joint Intelligence Committee. If the JIC had been dealt with previously in the way that has now been set out, perhaps the misuse of intelligence in September 2002 would not have occurred.

The Government have acknowledged the case for post-charge questioning and for telephone intercept evidence, and that is plainly something that we welcome. Those are the sort of proposals that offer the best approach to terrorism, as they are practical measures

[Sir Menzies Campbell]

that would assist successful prosecution, rather than complex measures designed to circumvent the principles of the criminal justice system.

In due course, we shall be asked to make judgments about how best to defeat terrorism in all its guises. The Prime Minister has asked for consensus, as he is entitled to, but I have to tell him that for many of us, consensus cannot be achieved at the expense of principle. The essential test for any proposed new power must always be whether it is necessary, not whether it is desirable or convenient.

Of course the public have a right to security, but they also have a right to security against the power of the state. We know that it is in the nature of the police to ask for more powers—for the best of motives but often for the worst of reasons. It is in the nature of Government to grant such powers, and it should be in the nature of Parliament to resist them.

Key questions have to be asked. What has changed in the past 18 months that merits asking Members of Parliament to change their minds about detention without charge? Which investigations in that period have been hampered by the absence of a 90-day limit, or of a limit greater than 28 days? Where is the conclusive evidence that an extension to the 28-day period is required, and what assessment has been made of the risk of fanning extremism with a detention policy that will act as a recruiting sergeant for terrorism, just as internment did for the IRA? Why does Britain require greater powers of detention than other comparable democracies, including Australia?

The Prime Minister dealt in his statement with the question of emergency under the Civil Contingencies Act, and he supplemented his position in response to a question from the Leader of the Opposition. It would be extraordinary if one single terrorist made it necessary to declare a state of emergency for the whole country. To that extent, I agree with the scepticism expressed by the Prime Minister, but it would be a most curious constitutional development if the alternative was that the matter should be brought before Parliament. I suppose that this is the high court of Parliament, but the suggestion that reports should be made to Parliament, followed by later parliamentary debate, seems to stand the normal provisions of our constitution—and the separation of powers—very much on their head.

Let me make it clear that we will fulfil our responsibilities, as I have no doubt will every other Member of this House, but it is worth pointing out that there are other things that the Government might have done. For example, why are there no measures to make it easier to charge people with a lower threshold offence at an earlier stage in investigations, when a prime facie case for a charge can be established? Finally, why is there no reference in the statement to the possibility of a more extensive use of plea bargaining, so that those on the periphery of conspiracies may be used as credible witnesses against those who are the principals in terrorist activity?

There is a balance to be struck—*[Interruption.]* I heard a Labour Member say, "Oh dear!" But he is talking about the rights and privileges of all the people whom he represents here, and we can be pretty certain that the first time one of his constituents finds himself or herself the subject of some of these provisions, he will be here to make the case that something should be done to alleviate the consequences. When we make judgments of this kind we make judgments that affect the very fabric of the society we live in. That is why those judgments have to be based on principle and not expediency.

The Prime Minister: I admire the passion with which the right hon. and learned Gentleman puts his case for the defence of civil liberties in this country; it is what marks out our constitution, and has done for hundreds of years. Protection against arbitrary acts by Government, or any vested interest, must be central to the business of the House in making sure that such things do not happen in this country. I agree with him on the issue of principle. The question we have to deal with, however, relates to circumstances in which, in the last few months, six investigations led to 27 or 28 days. I can put to the right hon. and learned Gentleman figures that show the degree and scale of the evidence, the intercontinental nature, and the multiple passports, multiple identities and multiple addresses used by terrorist suspects or potential terrorists. The scale and complexity of the investigations that the police now have to conduct in relation to the specific issue of terrorism dwarf what came before. As the Leader of the Opposition—and also, I believe, the right hon. and learned Gentleman—recognises, we are in a very different situation from that of even 10 years ago in relation to terrorism.

The question is: can we both ensure the security of the citizens of this country and protect the civil liberties of the individuals who live in this country? I believe that we can. I am sorry that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has interpreted our proposal for consultation as a threat to the relationship between the judiciary and Parliament. I do not believe that it is. I am suggesting that, as has been recognised by a number of people, there are circumstances in which it may be right to go beyond 28 days—unusual, rare and only in the instance of terrorism—and the question is how we can find a mechanism for dealing with those circumstances. One suggested mechanism is the declaration of a state of emergency and, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly says, people question whether that is the right message to send out. However, if the Home Secretary were to notify Parliament that a case was going beyond 28 days, if at the same time the independent reviewer, whom the right hon. and learned Gentleman has agreed should play a role in reviewing all cases of between 14 and 28 days, was brought to bear so that they could look at the individual case, and if the option was left—after the report of the independent reviewer—that there could be a debate in Parliament on the issue, that is not a threat to the judiciary; it is parliamentary accountability working at its best. I hope he will understand that what I am trying to do in the proposal is to uphold the principle of independent judicial oversight, but saying at the same time that where issues of public interest are raised it is right that in certain circumstances they be debated here in the Chamber of the House of Commons. I hope that he will agree on reflection that this is a way forward.

I agree that not only should we support the emergency services, the police and the security services, but we should recognise their bravery, professionalism, vigilance and dedication to duty. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman said today and I said yesterday, a way must be found in our honours system of both recognising and celebrating the work they do.

. I hope there will be agreement between the parties on the other matters we have discussed, and that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will use the summer and autumn period, when I invite him—*[Laughter]*—not to the usual talks that I have suggested, but to specific talks. As a protection, the Home Secretary will lead the talks this time. I invite the right hon. and learned Gentleman and his party to talk about the issues over the summer months to see whether, where I find that the independent reviewer, the Home Affairs Committee, the organisation Liberty and, today, the leader of the Conservative party, all recognise that there may be a case for going beyond 28 days in certain instances, there can be a way forward on which we can find agreement in the House. I hope we will work towards that agreement.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before I call the next hon. Member, may I say to the House that these are important matters and I am anxious to call as many Back Benchers as possible? No Back Bencher has yet asked a question, and we have had more than 40 minutes on the statement. There is another statement to follow and a heavy programme after that, so may I please ask for the briefest of questions from every Member? We will try to get as many Members in as possible. Perhaps I could also ask the Prime Minister if he, too, would not mind being as brief as he can.

John Reid (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister and congratulate him on the substance and spirit of his statement. It is right that he should seek consensus on these issues, and secondly, that he should seek to balance the strengthening of powers with the strengthening of scrutiny. Although the headlines will no doubt be devoted to the matter of detention, I urge my right hon. Friend to recognise that two other strategic issues should receive as much attention. The first is the development of the office for security and counter-terrorism, and within it the research, information and communications unit. If there truly is a battle for ideas and values, that integrated effort on our part is essential. Secondly, the whole of our border enforcement depends ultimately on willingness to use technological means based on identity management and biometrics. All the rest, whether a border force, increased numbers, uniforms or extended borders, will be as nothing unless we can biometrically identify people who come to this country, people who stay in it and people who leave it.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who as Home Secretary led the way in setting up the office for security and counter-terrorism. We continue—I hope—the work that he started, and I praise him for what he did when he was Home Secretary. He is absolutely right about the two issues that he raises. The first is the importance of winning what I call the hearts and minds argument—some people may put it differently—integrating people into our community while making sure that the arguments against violence and extremism, which will isolate terrorists and potential terrorists, are held right across the country. The office within the OSCT to which he referred will be very important in that regard and it is already doing important work. As I said, we will build on that, in co-operation not only with other countries but also with many communities in this country.

The debate about biometrics could itself lead to better consensus in the future. Once all the arguments are heard and debated, and the guarantees about the protection of civil liberties against arbitrariness are understood to be real protections, we may be able to move forward in that debate, too. I accept it is contentious but I agree with my right hon. Friend that we cannot have protection at our borders and e-borders without forms of identity management within our country.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): May I put this to the Prime Minister? I am not persuaded as yet of the need for an extension of pre-charge detention. If the Prime Minister wants to reach agreement across the House, why does not he establish a Committee of senior parliamentarians to take evidence on the matter? That Committee would report back to the House, and the House would then be in a position to take an informed view when it came to vote.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for the open mind he shows by suggesting that there ought to be more debate on the matter. The Home Affairs Committee exists to look at those very issues, and one of its previous reports said exactly what I am saying today:

> "There will be cases that do provide...justification. We believe...that the 28 day limit may well prove inadequate in the future."

That makes it "entirely possible" and "increasingly likely" that cases would go beyond 28 days. That is the all-party report of the Home Affairs Committee. If it can find a mechanism through which to debate the issues over the summer and the next few months it would be a good thing to do, but I shall look at the right hon. and learned Gentleman's proposal to see what progress we can make in ensuring that there is proper discussion. The evidence has certainly convinced me that we need to take action in rare and unusual circumstances in which the police will need to go beyond 28 days.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend carries a heavy responsibility in the fight against terrorism, but does he accept that Parliament agreed to 28 days—after the original three, five, seven or 14 days—because of the acute terrorist threat to our country, so we should be very hesitant indeed and reluctant to go further? That could be counter-productive in the fight against terrorists and their apologists, so I hope that he will continue to seek consensus. Consensus was found on 28 days, so we

[Mr. David Winnick]

should be hesitant about taking the controversial steps that divided the House nearly two years ago.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I hope that, in the spirit of what he says, he will have an open mind during the debate that we will have over the next few months. I agree with him that we should rule out the original proposal that did not command support in the House. I am also pretty clear that we should rule out the idea of an indefinite period of detention, and it should be made very clear that any maximum limit will be set by the House through legislation. I also believe that the evidence that we have, and the growing views of the Home Affairs Committee, the independent reviewer, and now, I believe, the Conservative party, that there may be circumstances in which we go beyond 28 days, should be reflected in an attempt to find a consensus on whether a further number of days are necessary and in which circumstances that should be permitted.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Can the Prime Minister tell us anything about the relationships that he has had in negotiations with the southern Government? The only part of the United Kingdom that has a land border is, of course, Northern Ireland, with the Irish Republic. What will be the reaction now, when we were all informed this morning from Northern Ireland that Operation Banner is no more? The Army has separated all its connections to security, which is now in the hands of the police.

Can I have a strong assurance from the Prime Minister that the people of Northern Ireland, especially now, as there is apparently government there, will be informed of what is taking place? I am not passing judgment on what he said. I come from a land that has been scourged with terrorism, and the baptism of terrorism is a terrible thing. My party is the largest Unionist party in the House from Northern Ireland and the largest party representing people in Northern Ireland, and we feel that every step should be taken that will hinder terrorism and give the people the peace that they need.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for playing a part in the debate this afternoon, and I thank him for being in the House today, given his responsibilities as First Minister of Northern Ireland. He knows both the dangers and the threats of terrorist violence. He also knows that in some circumstances, we must take measures that we would wish not to have to take, to deal with such a threat.

On the right hon. Gentleman's specific question about co-operation with the Republic of Ireland and its Government, I can tell him that when I met the Taoiseach, Mr. Ahern, only a few days ago at a meeting where he was also present for some part, I raised with him the exchange of data within the European Union. Because we are outside the Schengen agreement, we are not part of the exchange of data, which I believe is necessary if we are to track down potential terrorist suspects. He agrees with me that both his Government and our Government should press the rest of the EU for that exchange of information.

On security and travel arrangements common to the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, I can say that the Minister of State, Home Department, my hon. Friend Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne) is here today and these discussions are taking place, and I will ensure that the right hon. Gentleman is party to everything that is discussed on these matters.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's proposals today—in particular, the funding of the new Arabic channel by the BBC—but an extension of the 28-day limit is a question not just of getting consensus in the House, but of engaging with communities that will be disproportionately affected by any increase. When will the Prime Minister and other Ministers begin that consultation process?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I praise his work both in his community and throughout the country in bringing people together to discuss some of these difficult issues and in integrating people into the life of our country as he has so successfully done in recent years.

People will be surprised when they find out that a police investigation into one or two people can involve 200 phones, 400 computers, 8,000 CDs, 6,000 gigabytes of data and 70 premises, and cross three continents. I think that people will think that it may be difficult for the police to lay the charges that may be the right charges within a few days, and that they will understand why, in six cases in the past few months, we have gone to 27 or 28 days. But I agree with my right hon. Friend that that information is not readily known in the country at the moment, and that if we are to win this debate, and there should be a consensus on these issues, it is important that our Ministers, and, I hope, other hon. Members, can explain in the different communities of this country that this is an attempt to balance the increased need for security in our country to protect the citizens of this country—for their first right is the right to be secure and free in our country—with the need to protect against any arbitrariness in the future. I hope that we can come to a balanced view on this matter.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What proportion of the people currently being monitored and investigated for terrorism in our country have come from abroad in recent years? What impact does the Prime Minister think that his very welcome proposals to strengthen our borders will have on those numbers in the future?

The Prime Minister: I gave the figures in my statement for the number of people whom we were trying to refuse entry into this country on the grounds that we know of their previous offences, and the number of people whom we are trying to deport from our country on the grounds that they have either perpetrated a terrorist offence or been found guilty of other offences, and have been in prison, and should therefore be deported.

I told the House that the number of people being deported, which was only about 1,500 two or three years ago, had risen to more than 2,000 last year. We believe that we are on track, so that 4,000 foreign nationals who have served a sentence in British prisons will be deported from our country this year. We are stepping up to the mark to ensure that these numbers both remain on track and are achieved. We now look at such cases months before the sentence has finished. In future, we will look at those cases a year before the sentence is completed, so that we are in the best possible position to deport people. That is the information that I can give the right hon. Gentleman on the specifics.

As for international collaboration to deal with the problem of terrorists who are trying to get into our country illegally, that is precisely why I said in response to the First Minister of Northern Ireland that we need a proper exchange of data. I hope that, despite people's views on the EU, we can agree that that is a necessary means by which Governments must collaborate to avoid terrorism in the future.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend assure us that none of the 4,000 people who will be deported this year will be sent to countries where torture is endemic?

The Prime Minister: This is precisely why we are signing agreements with individual countries. My right hon. Friend may know that we have signed agreements with Jordan, Libya and Lebanon. We wish to sign agreements with other countries. We will move further on this in the months to come, so that we can receive the proper assurances. At the same time, however, it must be right that we should be able to deport people from our shores, either when they have been criminals in our country or when we know for a fact that they are practising or preaching terrorist violence in our country. That is why, in the spirit of what my right hon. Friend says, we will try to sign deportation agreements with more countries in the months to come.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister acknowledge the ready co-operation of the Scottish authorities—not just the police but the prosecution authorities—in securing the early apprehension of those suspected of planning and carrying out the terrorist attempts in Glasgow and London? The Prime Minister will know that a number of the things that he is proposing touch on the requirements of Scottish law—the evidential base, disclosure and possible questioning after charge—so does he see a role for the resumption of the joint ministerial committees between the Law Officers north and south of the border, and between the Justice Ministers north and south of the border, in seeking to contribute to the consensus that the right hon. Gentleman is seeking to establish?

The Prime Minister: I should also welcome—as I welcomed the First Minister of Northern Ireland—the First Minister of Scotland to the House today, and I thank him for the co-operation, both over that weekend and subsequently, in dealing with a terrorist incident that started in London, but of course was designed to cause terrible damage in Glasgow. That was prevented because of the courage, professionalism and vigilance of people at Glasgow airport and the voluntary effort of people who were simply passers-by. I congratulate all the emergency services and all those people who contributed to defeating what would have been a terrible loss of life in Glasgow as well as in London.

We want to co-operate in future on all the issues that the right hon. Gentleman talks about, whether through committees or individuals contacting one another. Obviously, we must recognise the difficulties that both legal and policing authorities face, but that co-operation will continue. I am very pleased to say that both the police and the prosecution authorities have had excellent co-operation since the events of 28 and 29 June in bringing people to charge. I believe that the police co-operation has been praised on both sides of the border.

Mr. Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I welcome the considered way in which my right hon. Friend has tackled the issue since taking office and I welcome all that he has said today. On the issues relating to communities and service delivery to communities, will he ensure that the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Home Office join up to ensure that the services that we deliver to the community are effective across the board? Will he also encourage more of the national Muslim organisations to take a key role in tackling some of the theological issues that lead to people being drawn into extremism?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and I praise the work that he has done in bringing people together. He and the Home Secretary have talked about the issue. I hope that they will be able to continue their dialogue on these matters, and that we can draw on his expertise and the knowledge that he has built up over the years as an incredibly successful representative in his area and region. I know that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has been speaking, and will continue to speak, to many of the faith organisations. They are very much part of the debate—indeed, they are right at its centre—and we want them to be part of the debate moving forward. I hope that we will be able to present a fuller report on some of these issues in the autumn, having consulted the very people he is talking about.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon) (Con): In October 2006, the then head of MI5 told us that the police and security services were monitoring 30 known plots, 200 groupings and 1,600 individuals. The Prime Minister has confirmed today that it is still 30 plots and 200 groupings, but he said that there were 2,000 individuals. Can he say a bit more about the extra 400 people who have come into our reckoning in the past nine months? Are they people we have allowed in from overseas, or are they young British nationals who have become radicalised? Please could he give us a bit more information?

The Prime Minister: The reports are provided to us by the security services. We are talking about people who are being regularly monitored because of the risk

[The Prime Minister]

they pose to the British people. They are living—and have probably lived for some time—in British communities. We have to face up to the fact that we are dealing in some cases with suicide bombers who are prepared, as British citizens, to murder and maim their own fellow citizens, whatever their religion. In some communities, we have a number of cells operating and we rely on our security services and our policing effort to do something about it. I am not in a position to distinguish between different nationalities at this stage. Obviously, with the hon. Gentleman having raised the matter, we can look at it, but he would not expect me to report to the House in that sort of detail when we are dealing with a police investigation.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): On the question of detention without trial, the whole House will examine the Prime Minister's proposals very carefully. However, does he accept that there are pragmatic reasons, as well as reasons of principle, why the House so decisively rejected any period longer than 28 days? It is by no means certain that there is a consensus, even among senior policemen and prosecutors, on the need for any extension. The new information that he mentioned earlier about the complexity of investigations was very much part of the debate about 90 days and in that sense is not new to the House. There is the issue that alarm is being caused in communities by the notion that people can be lifted and held without charge for months at a time. In that sense, it might well prove counter-productive. So the issues are not just issues of principle; they are also pragmatic issues and issues of how best to secure our national security.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the views that my hon. Friend expresses, because they are very much part of the debate. The scale of the investigations—for example the airline plot that I mentioned—is of a substantially and qualitatively different nature compared with some of the previous investigations. We are dealing with large amounts of data and, in some cases, with multiple passports, addresses and bank accounts. In some cases, the police do not know the identity of the person they have arrested for some time, because that person is operating under the cover of so many passports, identities, addresses and bank accounts. That issue is increasingly relevant in investigations. If we agree that we are in a qualitatively different position in terms of the threat from al-Qaeda-related activities, we have to consider the security measures that are necessary.

I hope that my hon. Friend will also bear in mind the fact that—because the debate has been so long-lasting—we have taken into account all the issues that have been raised previously. So if we were to move beyond 28 days, that would be subject to a case being made by the Director of Public Prosecutions, to the approval of a High Court judge every seven days, to a regular report by the independent reviewer, and to a debate in Parliament on that. If we went beyond 28 days in any instance, Parliament would have to be notified and a statement would have to be made to Parliament. There would be a review of the specific case by the independent reviewer in a timely fashion and provision for the House to scrutinise and debate a report on the circumstances surrounding the case.

I believe that we are combining the need for enhanced security and the protection of the lives of individuals with a recognition that there should be no arbitrariness in the way in which we treat individuals. Therefore we need not only enhanced judicial oversight, but proper parliamentary accountability. I hope that over the next few weeks and months my hon. Friend will look at the specific provisions, which I believe meet all the points that were eloquently made in the debate previously. I hope that she will bear it in mind that the proposal for 90 days has been dropped and that no one on this side of the House is proposing an indefinite period of detention.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): What is being offered as an alternative to the Prime Minister's proposal on 28 days is not just one thing, as he said, but a combination of at least three things: post-charge questioning, wire-tap evidence, and changing the prosecutors' code to allow earlier charging. Why does he reject that combination of three things in favour of his proposal, which to all intents and purposes is internment?

The Prime Minister: We are not rejecting it at all. We are saying that it is possible to complement the measures by a measured approach to what should happen after 28 days in circumstances that are rare and possibly very unusual, but where there is general agreement that we may have to go beyond 28 days. Again, I ask the hon. Gentleman to look at what we are writing in both as protections for the rights of the individual and so that Parliament can be properly informed on these matters. I hope that he will accept that there is a growing body of opinion that believes that going beyond 28 days may, in certain circumstances, be necessary. However, we are responding to what I believe is his view that there should be fair protections for the rights of the individual. I hope that, over the summer months, he will look at the specific proposal and see whether there is a potential consensus.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): On the question of the protection of critical infrastructure, my right hon. Friend will be aware that the EU, as well as NATO, is already preparing policy. Will the joint working party to which he referred, which will liaise with Germany and France, also work with the EU and NATO so that we have a concerted and coherent approach across Europe to the protection of critical infrastructure?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I know that he takes an interest in these matters. Although the working party that we are talking about is about hearts and minds in relation to isolating violent extremists and supporting mainstream and moderate opinion, I agree that there is also a need for cross-Government discussions on how best to learn the lessons of how to protect our infrastructure. That is as true of roads and railways as it is of vital utilities, nuclear power stations and other important infrastructure in our countries. We will draw on the lessons from other countries, as he suggests.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition on the consensual way in which they are attempting to approach the issue? However, may I also observe that if the leader of the Liberal Democrats can contemplate lowering the threshold of evidence required to charge a terrorist suspect, and if even Liberty can contemplate extending the period of detention—albeit by declaring a state of emergency—then there is no magic number of days that resolves the issue of principle when it comes to how we deal with non-state actors who are prepared to commit mass-casualty attacks on the British population? Therefore, will the Prime Minister undertake at least to allow the inquiry that he is setting up to consider Lord Carlile's proposal? There is a case to be made that setting a higher and higher threshold of days creates more alarm among the public than the exceptional circumstances in which we might have to detain someone for more than 28 days.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes the powerful general point that we are in unique circumstances, which he has described. I am glad that he put his case in the way that he did. Opinion is moving in this country. For example, post-charge questioning has also been proposed by Liberty, which we would perhaps not have expected it to do a few years ago. The very fact that Liberty has joined the debate on what might happen in circumstances in which we need to go beyond 28 days suggests that it is possible to find a consensus on the issues across the spectrum. I do not know that I necessarily agree with him that some authority other than Parliament should set the final or ultimate number of days for which people can be detained before a charge is put, but of course that, too, can be a matter for the debate, because there are four options in the discussion document. He may wish to make his own representations during discussions over the summer months.

Margaret Moran (Luton, South) (Lab): I welcome the introduction of e-borders and the electronic screening proposals, but will my right hon. Friend consider London Luton airport's offer to pilot some of the initiatives, which will increase passenger safety and speed up proceedings at airports? Will he also undertake to look into international co-operation, so that we can ensure that websites that exist to recruit and train terrorists are taken down as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is not only a member of the Home Affairs Committee, but represents a constituency with an airport, Luton, which is a very important part of our airport network. She is right to suggest that where airport authorities want to work with us to increase security, and want to pilot some of the means by which we do so, we are very happy to co-operate. I can see the Minister of State, Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne), who has responsibility for immigration; he will talk to my hon. Friend about how we can co-operate on those projects.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): The Prime Minister has announced that he is publishing the Intelligence and Security Committee report on extraordinary rendition today. I regret that he decided not to make a full statement on that important subject, too. Did the US authorities ignore vigorous protest from our security authorities about the rendition of Bisher al-Rawi and Jamil al-Banna, and will the Prime Minister take this opportunity unequivocally to condemn the policy of extraordinary rendition—that is, the practice whereby many people have been kidnapped by US authorities and taken to places where they may be tortured?

The Prime Minister: Where people are at risk of being tortured, we have been very clear about our objections to such a policy, but I think that the hon. Gentleman should read the report. There will be other chances for us to debate the details of it, and I am not going to condemn the US authorities in the way that he suggests.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister explain a bit more about the existing repatriation agreements with non-convention countries, and other such agreements that are due to be signed? Will he give an undertaking that in future we will sign such agreements only with convention countries, and that there will be monitoring of what happens to prisoners who are returned to a country, and of any charges or ill-treatment that they might face on their return?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises very important points, but it is in the interests of this country for more countries to be prepared to sign repatriation agreements with us. Over the next few months, I hope that we will be able to report to the House—there will be chances to debate this—that countries that hitherto have not been prepared to sign these agreements will do so. I think that that is for the benefit of us and of those countries, in the long run, so I will not wholly go down the road that he suggests. I will say, however, that when we sign these agreements, we will report to the House so that the House can debate them.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East) (Lab): The whole House will support my right hon. Friend in his efforts to secure consensus among the leaders of the political parties on the issues that we are discussing, but does he agree that there will be occasions when the Government and the Prime Minister will have to take decisions on security without consulting other politicians?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has experience of Government, and he rightly suggests that decisions that have to be made, and made quickly, will be made. However, on this particular issue, which has been contentious for the House, and on which there has been a big national debate, I believe that there is movement in opinion, and I believe that it is the duty of the House to see whether we can reflect those changes in opinion by trying to reach consensus. I do not apologise for trying to seek consensus on the issue.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does not the six-month threshold for the requirement for foreign nationals to have biometric ID leave a large loophole for would-be terrorists, who

[Mr. James Paice]

might seek to come to the country for a shorter period? Obviously, there is a serious issue of cost, and we cannot get away from that, but apart from cost, is there any reason why that threshold should allow a period as long as six months?

The Prime Minister: I hope that we can join the debate, because the hon. Gentleman appears to be supporting identity cards.

Mr. Paice: No.

The Prime Minister: Well, the hon. Gentleman supports biometric visas, which are the equivalent of identity cards for people who have been in the country for more than six months. I hope that we can debate the issue in future, because it seems to me that e-border controls, which we can tighten up, and border controls—we have made proposals on them today—can work properly only if we complement them with an ID system, such as the one that he proposes for foreign nationals in this country, and such as the one that we propose for British citizens in the long run. Let us join the debate and see whether we can get consensus, although it may not be with the Front Benchers of the two Opposition parties. It may be that we can draw on the changes that are taking place in the Conservative party, and that some Members on the Opposition Back Benches will support us.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I warmly welcome today's statement, but I ask the Prime Minister to accept that in the debate on the scrutiny of intelligence and security, there appears to be a desire for inquiries to be more open and accessible. The Intelligence and Security Committee regularly and scrupulously takes evidence from the security agencies. Is that not a valuable part of open democracy that should be maintained?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee. She has done a very valuable job and has distinguished herself in taking up the work of that Committee, which has resulted in today's report; we have also had very good reports from it in the past. The reason why I favour a reform of the Intelligence and Security Committee is not to lose the uniqueness of what she describes, which is the ability of parliamentarians to talk to the security services about matters that it would clearly not be in the interests of the country to report widely. There is a second reason why the Committee should take the form that we suggest: it ought to be able to tell the country, through its work, about the important efforts made, and energies used, by the security services in the interests of our whole country. That is the part of the work of Select Committees that other Committees can undertake, and we must find the means by which the Intelligence and Security Committee can do that, in the interests of the security services and parliamentary accountability. I applaud the vital work that is being done, and I know that the security services appreciate it, from our discussions with them of some of the big challenges that they face, but we ought also to think about a public role, which I think will enhance the security services and the reputation of Parliament.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I urge the Prime Minister to look again at the plans for e-borders, which are based around the check-in process. Technology already in use in America frequently does not pick up problems until after the aircraft has taken off. I urge him to look instead at the technology available off the shelf, much of it developed in Britain and in use in countries such as New Zealand and some of the Gulf states, which starts the process at the point at which people purchase their tickets.

The Prime Minister: We are looking at that, and if the hon. Gentleman has particular expertise that he wishes to bring to bear on these matters, I know that my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for immigration will be very happy to talk to him about it. We must benefit from all the new technology that is available, but I appeal to the hon. Gentleman as someone who I know has thought a lot about the issues: we must recognise that a combination of e-borders, border control and some form of identity management will be necessary for the future.

CSR and Aircraft Carriers

1.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Des Browne): I am pleased to inform the House that the Ministry of Defence has agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury a comprehensive spending review settlement for the next three years. The total departmental expenditure limit for Defence over the CSR period will be £34 billion in 2008-09, £35.3 billion in 2009-10 and £36.9 billion in 2010-11. That is an additional £7.7 billion for defence by 2011, and a 1.5 per cent. average annual real terms increase against our CSR baseline, excluding the costs of operations that are met from the reserves and the time-limited defence modernisation fund. The Treasury will, of course, continue to fund from the reserves the additional cost of operations over and above the defence budget, having already provided some £6.6 billion from the reserves to support the front line since 2001.

The settlement continues the longest period of sustained real growth in planned defence spending since the 1980s; that is evidence of the Government's commitment to defence and to the men and women who serve with the utmost bravery in our armed forces.

The result of Labour's consistent funding for defence is that the defence budget will be significantly higher in real terms than the budget that we inherited in 1997—on average, a billion pounds more for defence every year, for 10 years. Compare this with the last five years of the Tory Government, when the defence budget was being cut by around £500 million a year.

Our priority remains success on current operations. This settlement gives the MOD the financial certainty required to continue delivering that success. Over the past year I have been able to announce to the House important enhancements in protected vehicles, in helicopters and in surveillance. The settlement will enable us to do more in all these areas and others. It also allows for additional investment in the support that our service personnel deserve, building on recent improvements in pay, in the new tax-free operational bonus, in medical care for our wounded personnel and in accommodation.

At the same time as ensuring success on current operations, and support for our people, this settlement enables us to invest in the capabilities that we will need for the future. I am pleased to be able to confirm today that we will place orders for two 65,000 tonne aircraft carriers to provide our front-line forces with the modern, world-class capabilities that they will need over the coming decades. These will be named HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales. They are expected to enter service in 2014 and 2016, respectively.

This delivers on the Government's promise in the 1998 strategic defence review. The carriers represent a step change in our capability, enabling us to deliver increased strategic effect and influence around the world at a time and place of our choosing. They will be a key component of the improved expeditionary capabilities that we need to confront the diverse range of threats in today's security environment. They are evidence of our commitment to ensuring that our armed forces are modern, versatile and equipped for the future.

In parallel, we will continue to work closely with France. Our co-operation has already yielded real benefits. We have shared the costs of developing the common baseline design to which we are committing today and we have capitalised on our huge collective technical and military experience. Our industries are exploring further opportunities for mutual benefit, including joint procurements of equipment for the carriers, and shared support arrangements. We look forward to making a joint announcement on further co-operation in the next few months.

The carrier programme will sustain and create some 10,000 jobs across the UK, but we have always been clear that the carriers cannot be built without change in the maritime sector. As we set out in the defence industrial strategy, we need further improvements in efficiency to ensure that the taxpayer is getting value for money. We need to ensure that the UK maritime industry is the right size and shape, so that it is sustainable in the longer term, so I am pleased that VT Group and BAE Systems intend to form a joint venture in naval shipbuilding and support.

The creation of such a joint venture will enable the Royal Navy to work with industry to deliver the infrastructure that the Navy will need to support the fleet in the future while retaining all three of our existing naval bases at Portsmouth, Devonport and Faslane. This will be good news for the three communities and the service, civilian and contractor personnel employed at the bases. None the less, some reductions in the 17,600 personnel currently employed will be necessary and will be taken forward in consultation with trade unions in the usual way. We aim to rationalise infrastructure and spare capacity, streamline processes and build on partnering and other commercial arrangements. For example, today we are also announcing a £1 billion partnering arrangement with Rolls-Royce for the in-service support of the nuclear steam raising plant that powers the Royal Navy's submarines over the next decade.

I am determined to ensure that more of our money is spent where it is really needed, reducing overheads to put more into the front line and into supporting our people. To enhance the spending power that this settlement gives us, we will make savings against the Department's overheads, including a 5 per cent. year-on-year saving in our administrative overhead over the next three years and a 25 per cent. reduction in our head office. These are additional to the £2.8 billion efficiencies delivered over the spending review 2004 period.

A priority through the CSR period will be the continued investment in improving accommodation for our people and their families. We expect to spend some £550 million on this over the three-year period, including plans to upgrade over 18,000 barrack-type bed spaces. This builds upon the achievements of recent years in providing upgrades to our service families homes and our plans to spend £5 billion over the next 10 years on upgrading and maintaining accommodation. We also intend to explore with the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government how best we can support the wish of many servicemen and women to own their own homes.

[Des Browne]

Full details of the CSR settlement for defence will be announced in the autumn, alongside the outcome for all Government Departments. Today, however, I am providing a summary for the Library of the House.

Our armed forces are admired and respected world wide. I am conscious that with operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, we are currently asking our armed forces to do a lot. In return we must ensure that the Government do all they can to support them and their families. This significant additional investment shows that the Government are determined to do just that, and to ensure that in the years ahead they maintain their well-earned and much deserved reputation for being the best armed forces in the world.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and for prior sight of it.

There has been widespread support on both sides of the House for both the carrier programme and the joint strike fighter, and I am pleased that we finally have the decision that we have been promised since February 2004. Indeed, the carriers have been in planning and design for twice the length of the second world war.

Although it is welcome, let us not forget that the decision has come at a high price for the Navy. Since 1997 the Royal Navy has faced significant cuts in force levels completely at odds with the Government's strategic defence review, which called for 32 surface combatants. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Minister with responsibility for security that

"we need 30 destroyers and frigates for what the government wants us to do"?

Will the right hon. Gentleman guarantee today that we will see no further reductions in the surface fleet from its current inadequate numbers?

If we are to have the new carriers, they will need adequate protection. The Government initially assessed the need for eight of the new Type 45 destroyers. Will the Secretary of State guarantee today that all eight will be procured? If we are to have the carriers, they will need to carry the appropriate aircraft. Can he tell us how many F35s it is currently intended to have on each of the carriers, and how many helicopters will complement that number? I presume that the Government know what they want to have on their carriers.

It is disappointing that the carriers will enter service at least two years later than expected. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that any co-operation with France in order to reduce costs will not result in a further delay for the carriers' introduction? If we are to have the carriers, they will have to be based somewhere. What does today's statement tell us about the Government's longer-term plans for our naval bases? Where will the carriers be based? If he can be so specific about job cuts, can he be more specific about his wider intentions?

There is no suitable dry dock for a 65,000 tonne 900 ft carrier at Portsmouth or Devonport. Construction of a new dock or the lengthening of the existing docks would be a very expensive process. What are the Government's plans?

We welcome the retention of three of our existing naval bases. That will be welcomed on both sides of the House, and it is a matter on which we have campaigned, but there will be a strong suspicion that we did not get the full details today. Finally on this, can the Secretary of State guarantee that we will continue to have eight attack submarines, as we have been promised?

We will look at the Government's expenditure plans in great detail. We are involved in two long military conflicts. They have cost the lives of 227 of our servicemen and women, and have cost the taxpayer over £7 billion. The intensity of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in the loss of equipment and in equipment being worn out much more quickly than would otherwise have been expected. In other words, the defence budget needs to rise faster than predicted just for us to stand still. On top of this, there is increasing evidence that operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have not been fully funded by the special reserve and that there has been salami-slicing of equipment and training budgets to fill the gap.

The Secretary of State told us that the budget will go up by £7.7 billion by 2011. During the period up to 2011, what costs will be incurred in the procurement of the carriers, the procurement of the JSF, the Trident replacement programme, the procurement of the Type 45s, the future rapid effect system, the cost of upgrading the naval bases for the carriers, and the cost of replacing assets lost, damaged or prematurely worn out by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan? Only when we have detailed answers to those questions will we be able to make a judgment on whether this is anything like an adequate settlement for the armed forces, given what they are being asked to do. Under the current Prime Minister, we are only too well aware, following his last Budget, that financial statements that look good today can look very different tomorrow. If there is any sleight of hand in what the Government are saying on defence expenditure, it will not be forgiven by our troops in combat or in this House.

Des Browne: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's welcome for the announcement on the carriers. There has never been an announcement as to when the carriers would come into service—

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): 2012 and 2015.

Des Browne: There was an expectation on the part of some people. However, with all due respect to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), given the nature and complexity of this project, that is his best criticism. This is a very large and important procurement with significant implications not only for the Navy but for communities throughout the country, as well as for our shipbuilding infrastructure and the industry that will support the surface fleet for decades to come. It is right that we should continue to negotiate and consider this project and the way in which we have handled it before getting to this stage.

The hon. Gentleman asked several specific questions, which is of course his wont at the Dispatch Box. *[Interruption.]* As he says, it is his job. In due course, as decisions are made in a very dynamic environment and

as consideration is given to all the issues that he raises, announcements will be made. He has been in his job for long enough to know that we have consistently announced investments not only in the long-term support of our armed forces and equipment but in responding to their short-term needs in a dynamic environment. Indeed, I made reference to some of the announcements that I have had the privilege to be able to make in relation to protected vehicles, helicopters—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Mr. Speaker takes a very dim view of electronic devices going off in the Chamber. I am not quite sure whom it belongs to, but this is a general plea to the House. We have already had one going off this afternoon, but the Member scuttled out before I could reprimand him. It is very rude and seriously disturbs the whole tenor of the debate, and I hope that hon. Members will try not to do it in future.

Peter Viggers (Gosport) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I apologise to you and to the House? I turned my telephone off before I came into the House, and I do not understand why it went off.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that I do not have the power to deal with electronic devices, but my earlier remarks still apply.

Des Browne: That is an example of the complexity of modern technological equipment. Perhaps it gives us a small insight into how complex it is to design and build carriers, with their integrated systems, and why we have to take such time and care to ensure that they are right.

Let me reply to the questions asked by the hon. Member for Woodspring. As I said, announcements will be made appropriately. I say to him, in the spirit in which the question was asked, that we stand by our description of what is necessary to sustain our Navy for the challenges that it faces and deals with so well and so professionally across the world. Only this week, in chairing a meeting of the Admiralty Board, I was immensely impressed by the work that our Navy is able to do right across the world. I have asked for a piece of work to be done to compare its current presence and capability with what it was 10 or 20 years ago. My sense is that we will discover that it is now doing much more because it is better trained and better equipped than it was then. The simplistic view of just counting ships and paying no regard to capability pays no proper respect to what it does.

Our co-operation with France has been a bonus to us, not a hindrance. We will continue with it, and it will in no way affect the timing of any further statements.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's scrutiny of the spending aspects of the statement; that is entirely appropriate and exactly what he should do. However,

"there is no magic pot of money we can dip into to spend a lot more on the Armed Services, much as we would like to."

Those words are not mine but those of the Leader of the Opposition on Webcameron in April 2007. The challenge that the hon. Member for Woodspring faces is not to scrutinise our spending plans, which will increase spending on our armed forces, but to explain to the country what his party would spend if it were in government. However, he has already been warned by the shadow Chancellor not to make spending promises.

The hon. Gentleman asked where the carriers will be based. We will make that announcement when it is the appropriate time to do so.

Mr. Adam Ingram (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which will be well received in the Royal Navy, particularly with regard to the aircraft carriers. It will be well received across the armed forces generally, and there is no question in my mind but that it will be well received in industry, particularly the shipbuilding industry. May I remind my right hon. Friend of the old saying that it was tears that made the Clyde? There will be cheers on the Clyde today following this announcement.

Des Browne: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome and for his kind words. I pay tribute to the contribution that he has made to our ability to make the announcement on the carriers. When he was Minister with responsibility for the armed forces, he made a significant contribution to the challenges of modernising a substantial part of the way in which we deliver effect through the MOD. We are now in a position to apply the substantial savings and efficiencies that he was able to generate for future generations. He is entitled to a significant share of the praise for this announcement.

Willie Rennie (Dunfermline and West Fife) (LD): I welcome the statement and thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of it.

On the spending announcement, the Secretary of State will understand that we will wish to study the content in detail over the coming period. It will be important for us to ensure that the difficulties with overstretch and shortages in personnel and the problems with equipment are addressed. I am sure that the communities of the three Navy bases will welcome the decision but will perhaps wait with trepidation as regards the potential job losses.

If Britain is to be a force for good around the world, the carriers will be an essential part of our capability. With them, we will be able to conduct operations in far-flung parts. Can the Secretary of State explain what role the dockyards at Rosyth, Barrow, the Clyde and Portsmouth will play? If the final commissioning is to take place at Rosyth, that will be one of the most complex construction projects ever on the Forth, and even more significant than the iconic Forth bridge. The carriers will be a dramatic sight from many parts of Fife, including North Queensferry in my constituency, the home of the Prime Minister. With construction taking place in all parts of the UK, this will be Britain at its best.

It has been said that if the carriers can be built on time and within budget, other countries will be interested in buying from us. Which countries are interested? Is the JSF still the aircraft of choice for the carriers? We have heard about delays with the JSF—what effect will that have on the carriers? Can the Secretary of State clarify when all forces accommodation will be brought up to standard?

Des Browne: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's welcome for the announcement. As I said, the carriers will sustain and create 10,000 jobs in the UK, and during the peak assembly time that will mean nearly 5,000 jobs at the four main yards of Rosyth, Govan, Portsmouth and Barrow. Of course, detailed negotiations still have to take place on the final shape of the contracts, and whether further improvements can be made on our negotiations thus far is a challenge for the future. However, we are in a position to move forward on that, which is why I was able to make today's announcement.

The hon. Gentleman will see the carriers appear in his constituency as they are assembled at Rosyth. I am sure that they will be admired as much as other massive constructions nearby, which have nearly become wonders of the world; they will attract significant interest.

Our co-operative work with France concerning its desire to build carriers to the same design is at an advanced stage. I am not in a position at this stage to share publicly any other commercial discussions that are taking place, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands why. When I am in a position—or when those involved in the construction are in such a position—to make public statements about advances in discussions on interests that might have been expressed by other countries, I will do that.

It may be that, because I lost a particular piece of paper, I have not given the House a piece of information that relates to a question from the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). The carriers are to be base-ported at Portsmouth.

We remain committed to the JSF programme, which continues, as the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Willie Rennie) knows. With the help of many people in the House, we seek to resolve the challenges of that programme in order to ensure that our aircraft of choice flies from these carriers.

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan) (Lab): I welcome the announcement about building the two carriers. They will be vital to the Royal Navy's ability to operate independently, if necessary, throughout the world. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the importance of the Barrow shipyard not just to south Cumbria, but to the whole of the north-west. Will he therefore confirm that a substantial proportion of the two carriers will be built at the Barrow shipyard?

Des Browne: I can of course confirm my hon. Friend's understanding that the Barrow shipyard will make a substantial contribution to the construction of the carriers as they are built in blocks. I am not in a position to give him specific proportions, but these figures may give him an indication of the proportion of work that the Barrow shipyard can expect when the negotiations and contracts are concluded. During the peak assembly time, nearly 5,000 jobs will be sustained or created in the four main yards, of which it is estimated 1,100 will be in Barrow.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): I am very pleased indeed that the carriers are going ahead. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that the procurement of the FRES vehicles and the future strategic tanker aircraft will not be compromised by this procurement? He has announced some useful increases in defence spending, but does he nevertheless not feel that something is fundamentally wrong? Our Army is now 98,000 strong, our Navy is dropping in size and our Air Force is dropping very rapidly. We are asking so much of them; do we not need a fundamental change in our approach to defence from all parties in this House, and from the country as a whole?

Des Browne: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I respect the knowledge that he has gained, not just in his time as a Minister at the Ministry of Defence but in the valuable service he provides to the House in his chairmanship of the Select Committee on Defence, the role of which we in the MOD greatly value. Nobody in the House could do anything other than respect views that he expresses.

In relation to the overall spending envelope available to the Government in this spending review, defence has done four times as well as it has done in the past. That may not be the step change that the right hon. Gentleman wants, but there is something this Government cannot be criticised for: it cannot be said of us, as it could of the previous Government, that we have not increased spending quite substantially, year on year, in real terms. Indeed, we have committed ourselves to investment in the long term, as well as in excess of £6 billion from the reserves to support those troops we have committed to the front line.

We ask a lot of our forces, and we focused on that over the weekend because of a leaked report, which allegedly said something that I said at the Dispatch Box, if not in exactly the same words, but almost in terms. The right hon. Gentleman will know, as will many other hon. Members, that we do not intend to sustain the commitment we are asking of our armed forces, and there are already clear indications that we are significantly reducing it, not just in Iraq but in Bosnia, and we are coming to the end of Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Hopefully, we are moving into an environment where we will not be asking our troops for that level of commitment continuously, and we can then address some of the issues that that would have generated otherwise.

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement today and, along with 2,000 workers in the Scotstoun yard in my constituency and all the other workers on the Clyde, I thank him. On the work that is coming to the Clyde—although I do not want to appear greedy—would he perhaps make a statement on what is happening with No. 7 and No. 8 of the Type 45s, which would keep those workers in employment well beyond the next decade?

Des Browne: My hon. Friend knows that we have a forward plan for shipbuilding that is described in the response to the strategic defence review. There are numbers associated with that, which I do not depart from. He also knows, however, that both sides involved in negotiations on the orders that we placed for the Type 45s have to face challenges relating to their cost. It is my responsibility to ensure value for money for the taxpayer. Commitments to procurement in the long

term necessarily have to be incremental, and I am afraid that they have to stay that way.

When I am ready to make announcements on the challenges we have set ourselves for the surface fleet and submarines, I shall make them, but I am not in a position to announce everything at once. I am in a position to make this announcement today. It is very good news for my hon. Friend's constituents, and for a very important employer in his constituency. It is very good news for people throughout the United Kingdom, and for the Navy. I ask him to rest there for a time, and enjoy that good news, before demanding that we move on.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I repeat my request for brief questions and, I hope, brief answers from the Secretary of State? We will try to get as many people in as possible.

Peter Viggers: Does the Secretary of State agree that the aircraft carriers will operate in task groups, and that they will need full protection against airborne and submarine threats? The Type 45 is extremely capable against airborne threat, but is there not a yawning gap for the task groups' defence against submarine threat?

Des Browne: The hon. Gentleman knows that we refer to these as a combined taskforce. We talk about carriers in relation not just to the actual boat but to what flies from the carrier and what supports it. There will be a combined taskforce that reflects all of the threats, which is why we are putting significant investment into submarines so that there is such capability to be deployed when it needs to be.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, South-West) (Lab/Co-op): Hallelujah! This announcement will be much welcomed by the work forces, the unions and the management of shipbuilding industries up and down the Clyde. However, does the Secretary of State agree that the placing of these orders for aircraft carriers is an enormous triumph for the Union? As a fellow Scottish MP, does he agree that none of the hundreds—indeed, thousands—of man hours that will come to Scottish yards and Scottish suppliers would have come to a separated, segregated and isolated Scotland?

Des Browne: I thought that my hon. Friend was going to put me in a position whereby I could say that there was a possibility of persuading my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) to rest on his laurels a little and enjoy success; I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, South-West (Mr. Davidson) would insist on the next order. However, he asks me a question that enables me to say that, as the construction of the substantial vessels takes place on the Clyde and people see them, they will be a constant reminder to the people of Scotland that being part of the United Kingdom brings benefits not only to their security and safety but to their economic prospects, because they have a Government who intend to provide security and the economic power to invest. A Scotland torn out of the United Kingdom would almost certainly be unable to afford to do that.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): The Minister responsible for defence equipment and support has made it clear that if the technology share agreement that affects the development of the joint strike fighter is found wanting Britain may not buy that aircraft for the carriers. Are there sufficient resources in the settlement to maintain the development of a marine version of the Eurofighter Typhoon?

Des Browne: In our negotiations about the joint strike fighter programme we are not planning for failure. Having said that, as my noble Friend Lord Drayson has said, including to the right hon. Gentleman, we have contingency planning for that—albeit remote—eventuality. Of course, that planning includes the necessary resources to carry through the development.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on achieving an above-inflation increase in the settlement. I am sure that he put a great deal of personal effort into that. I also welcome the investment in the important new capability of the future carrier and the keeping of the three naval bases. Does he acknowledge that, to optimise Devonport sustainably, there is a need for a long-term commitment to support surface ship fleet work at Devonport?

Des Browne: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and other hon. Members who represent constituencies where there are naval bases, for their contribution to the naval base review. All those communities have been championed exceptionally by their local Members, who have conducted their advocacy on behalf of their communities with respect for each other. My hon. Friend in particular is entitled to credit for that. There is no doughtier champion of her community. She must be pleased today that there is a long-term future for Devonport. The investment that the Government put in the infrastructure of the base must have been obvious to the people of Devonport and an indication of how much we value that resource.

Mr. Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I welcome the announcement about ordering the carriers and retaining the Faslane base, although I am obviously concerned about the prospect of job losses.

May I make the case to the Secretary of State for basing the aircraft carriers at Faslane? He mentioned Portsmouth at the end of a reply to another question, but I hope that he will reconsider the decision. Faslane has superb deep-water anchorage and enough clearance for large ships such as the new aircraft carriers to get in, even at low tide. There is also plenty of space to accommodate all the back-up support that the carriers need. I therefore hope that the Secretary of State will reconsider basing them at Faslane.

Des Browne: The hon. Gentleman is a champion for his community, although I wonder if those whom he purports to champion understand the consequences for his community and jobs there of his view on the deterrent.

[Des Browne]

I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument, but decisions about where to base the carriers—they are to be base-ported at Portsmouth—are not made simply on the depth of the water. There are several other issues to be taken into consideration. The naval base review balanced them all and concluded that, to support our fleet, we need all three existing naval bases, including Faslane, which makes an extraordinary contribution to sustaining our Navy. At some stage, those communities need to work together and not necessarily in competition for the resources that others have.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry (Portsmouth, North) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend knows that I wrote to him a few weeks ago in my capacity as chair of the Portsmouth naval base stakeholders group and asked him to make an announcement before the recess to allay some of the uncertainty in my constituency. I therefore sincerely thank him for his statement, for removing the cloud that hung over Portsmouth naval base and recognising the important role that our base plays in keeping the country secure. Today's announcement, coupled with the aircraft carrier contract, will give my city a huge boost and ensure that the Royal Navy is equipped for its future challenges—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Secretary of State.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: I did not get in a question!

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady has had her two penn'orth.

Des Browne: I think my hon. Friend may be satisfied with the answer, because it starts by paying tribute to Portsmouth, its people and those who work in the naval base and support our Navy so splendidly. They, as well as the people of Devonport and the people on the Clyde, are entitled to have their significant contribution rewarded by such an announcement. However, they should now begin to work with us to try to find the necessary efficiencies to allow us to offer all three communities and their bases the sort of long-term future that they want.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon) (Con): In relation to the naval bases, will the Secretary of State give us an idea of the scale of the job losses to which he referred, so that the community of Plymouth can begin to prepare itself? What is the likely impact—the knock-on effect—on Devonport dockyard? Will he confirm that no surface ships that are currently base-ported in Devonport will be shifted to Portsmouth as a consequence of today's statement? Although it is, of course, welcome that Devonport naval base will not be closed, will he confirm that we are not condemned to death by a thousand cuts? We are looking for reassurance.

Des Browne: There is no intention of condemning anybody to death by a thousand cuts. I made it clear to those who conducted the review that I wanted an honest assessment and not something that misrepresented the position and then got us into salami-slicing in the communities that we are considering. That would have been dishonest and inappropriate. I am advised comprehensively by the outcome of the review that we can sustain significant bases in all three places. I am not prepared, outwith the appropriate consultations and discussions that need to take place, to bandy figures or even general descriptions. However, let me emphasise that there will be co-operative, open and continued discussion with hon. Members. We will share information with hon. Members to the extent that we can as the next process goes on. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is no intention of making salami cuts, but I do not want a continuation of competition between the bases for the opportunities that exist. It is now time for us all to co-operate and work in the way that the industry and the Ministry of Defence are beginning to show people can achieve a future for all of us.

John Reid (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and yet another real-terms increase for the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence, however that might be tempered by recognising the huge challenge and commitment that our forces face. It is in stark contrast to the 28 per cent. cut in real terms over some seven years under the Conservative Government.

I especially welcome the announcement about the carriers. I declare an interest. I was there at the birth of the carriers in the strategic defence review. I was there, as Secretary of State for Scotland, at the saving of the Scottish yards, which I confirmed when I was Defence Secretary.

I am especially delighted for the Navy—it deserves the announcement as reward and recompense for its efforts—and the workers on the Clyde. Seven years ago, when the yards were on the verge of closure, they were given a chance. They have taken that chance and earned the right to secure their future. Today, my right hon. Friend has given them the chance to do that.

Des Browne: It is my privilege and pleasure to build on the work that my right hon. Friend did in the two terms that he spent at the Ministry of Defence, first as Minister for the Armed Forces and latterly as Secretary of State for Defence, immediately before I took over. There will be recognition by the Navy and others of the contribution that he made on a number of significant challenges, not least the development and publication in time of the defence industrial strategy. Without that we would not have achieved the level of affordability that we have achieved and we would not have been able to make today's announcement. He is therefore entitled to a significant portion of the credit for today's announcement, and I am sure that he will be given it in any event, without my seeking it for him.

Finally, with my right hon. Friend's special knowledge of the issue, he knows that, because of the reductions that we inherited and the damage that they did to the infrastructure of our armed forces, which he pointed out, the muttering of excuses from the Conservative Benches does not explain things all the way.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): So inadequate was the provision for defence expenditure from the previous Conservative Government that this Government, for whom the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid) was Minister for the Armed Forces, decided

to cut the budget by £1 billion a year—a cut that was reduced to £500 million a year only by the intervention of the then Chief of the Defence Staff. A little less political spin in the Secretary of State's statement would have done a little more honour to his office. To describe the real increase in defence expenditure given in the figures as quite substantial breaks any reasoned connection with the English language. The armed forces are exhausted and worn out. Their forward equipment programme will be substantially damaged by the expenditure involved in trying to accommodate the aircraft carriers and aircraft. What are the consequences for the forward equipment programme of the Secretary of State's statement today?

Des Browne: The hon. Gentleman describes the budget in the early years of this Government. My recollection is that we came to power with a commitment to follow the planned budget of the previous Conservative Government. We inherited an economic situation that required significant attention and a legacy of under-investment not only in our armed forces, but throughout public services. As he knows, or should know, spending is an issue of priority but there is a limited pot of money for it, as his own leader points out on his website.

The hon. Gentleman also knows—this is not something that we have instigated in government—that the Ministry of Defence looks at the equipment programme year on year, at its affordability in relation to the available budget and at the inflationary factors that have affected that. We will continue to do that. When we have to make tough decisions, as every Government do, we will announce them to Parliament. However, we will make no decisions that in any way affect the capability or the performance of our armed forces. The whole focus of what we do in relation to the budget will be to ensure that we support our armed forces to face the challenges that we set for them. We have done that consistently since I have been the Secretary of State.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have been in the House for only a short time now and I have heard two very long questions and quite lengthy answers. If I am to try to call all other hon. Members, I must ask for very short questions and concise answers, as we have quite a lot of other business to be done today.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has rightly praised the calibre of our personnel in the Royal Navy. It is truly of an exceptionally high standard. Can he assure the House that the changes that he has announced today will in no way be to the detriment of the high-quality training that is afforded to our personnel, particularly given the huge technological challenges facing the Royal Navy with the future vessels?

Des Browne: I can give my hon. Friend the assurances that he seeks.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): It is a fact that there are fewer shipbuilding jobs in Scotland now than there were in 1997. It is therefore welcome to hear today's announcement on the carriers and the news that Scotland's only operating naval base is to be retained. However, is the Secretary of State aware of concerns about job retention on the Clyde in relation to the MARS—military afloat reach and sustainability—project? As we are talking about time scales two days before the recess, will he confirm that he now expects the board of inquiry into the Afghan Nimrod tragedy to take place during the recess?

Des Browne: The House is stunned every time the hon. Gentleman gets to his feet and asks questions about jobs in relation to military equipment or installations that his party does not support. In fact, it is a party with an avowed policy of taking us out of NATO. Never mind the fact that his party would never be able to afford to build aircraft carriers or parts of them in Scotland—it would have no intention of doing so, because they would not be necessary for the forces that it would need. It is sometimes difficult to respond to challenges on the Floor of the House, but it is very easy to respond to challenges from the hon. Gentleman's party in those circumstances. If he had his way, there would be practically no work in Scotland.

Angus Robertson: What about the questions?

Des Browne: The hon. Gentleman asked about a part of the equipment programme, on which I will make an announcement in due course. I do not know the answer to his question about the board of inquiry, but I will be in touch with him about it, because I know that he has a genuine constituency interest in the matter.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the gateway system operates under smart acquisition, to prevent projects from overrunning on time and money. When he made the decision on today's announcement on aircraft carriers, how many traffic lights were on green and how many were on red in the main gateway?

Des Browne: If we were not in a position to go through a green traffic light, I would certainly not drive through a red one.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Representing royal naval air station Yeovilton, I warmly welcome the announcement on the future carriers. Has a decision been taken on the future use of the existing carriers? In particular, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the need for a second helicopter carrier to supplement HMS Ocean?

Des Browne: No decision has been made on the future use of the carriers. I will write to the hon. Gentleman on his question about another helicopter carrier.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I warmly welcome the announcement of the carriers today. It is good news not only for the Navy and the shipbuilding industry, but for the defence industry. The announcement will also be good news in the north-east, as a lot of small and medium-sized enterprises will get work from the contract. I urge my right hon. Friend to ask the consortium to work with Northern Defence Industries

[Mr. Kevan Jones]

andother organisations that help SMEs to get work in the supply chain, so that the maximum economic impact of the orders is spread throughout the United Kingdom.

Des Browne: My hon. Friend is a champion of workers not only in larger companies, but in important niche companies that make a valued contribution to the building of our equipment. I give him the assurance that he asks for and will ensure that that message is driven home to those who will build the carriers.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): How confident is my right hon. Friend that a short take-off and vertical landing version of the joint strike fighter will be made available? Given the contingency that he mentioned in answering the question that the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) asked, would a carrier-based version of the Typhoon be ready by 2014?

Des Browne: I understand why my hon. Friend asks the question. I understand his desire to shift our attention from the preferred option of the JSF to the alternative that he prefers, for obvious reasons to do with job prospects and other investment in his community. I repeat to the House that we are still committed to the JSF programme and we are not planning for failure. We have a plan B, but for very good commercial reasons and I do not want to go into the detail of that publicly.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Lab): The news about the carriers is obviously splendid and there will be widespread support for it throughout the country. Everybody hopes that the JSF will be available and that the technology transfer problems with the Americans can be resolved. However, there is considerable anxiety about the possibility of the JSF not being available or not being available on acceptable terms. There is also anxiety about whether a marine version of the Typhoon can be developed in time if necessary, so that the carriers can be deployed from 2014. If neither of those solutions works, has my right hon. Friend considered the possibility of ordering the Rafale?

Des Browne: All the issues that my hon. Friend has raised are under consideration, but it would be otiose for me to repeat the answer that I have already given to the House twice.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his proposals on home ownership for our service personnel. One of the greatest disincentives to retention is the difficulty that our service families have in getting on to the property ladder these days. I urge him to ensure that adequate funds are made available by the Treasury, and that the opportunity for home ownership is spread right across the country and not simply contained in the areas in which our military personnel are presently based.

Des Browne: I can reassure my hon. Friend that there is a commitment at the highest level in the Government to give our best support to our servicemen and women to achieve the aspiration that many of them have to own their own home. Increasingly, those in the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force have been able to achieve that. Settling the Army in larger bases for longer periods will be a key to unlocking that opportunity for members of that service. There is no lack of commitment to identifying the release of resources to enable those service personnel who wish to buy their own home to do so. It is a significant challenge, but I agree with my hon. Friend that it is a key to retention.

John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): May I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon? It is confirmation, if confirmation were needed, that Labour is the true party of defence in this country. Given the large-scale spending commitments that he has announced, however, will he give the House an assurance that phase 2 and phase 3 military skills training will remain the No. 1 priority, and that today's announcement will not have an adverse impact on the programme solution for the defence training rationalisation programme?

Des Browne: Today's decision will have no effect at all on the ongoing negotiations and discussions on meeting the affordability challenge of phase 2 of the defence training rationalisation. That is a self-contained issue that we need to negotiate our way through. I do not underestimate the nature of that challenge, as I explained when I announced to the House in some detail our preferred bidders for those contracts, but my hon. Friend can be assured that neither issue is dependent on the other.

Points of Order

2.42 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. While the Secretary of State is still in the Chamber, may I ask for your guidance? There is great concern in the British defence industry—the subject of the statement today—about the future of the Defence Export Services Organisation. I have sought to obtain information from the Secretary of State but, unfortunately, all that I have been told is that matters of mutual interest are occasionally discussed between his Department and the Treasury. Can you advise me on how, in the last dying embers of this stage of the Parliament, I can obtain information about this matter? We now face two months of recess, during which the defence industry will be left in great uncertainty about the future of an organisation that contributes enormously to the success of British defence exports overseas. Can you assist me in this matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Strictly speaking, on a point of order, I cannot. However, I suspect that the Secretary of State might wish to stretch the point of order to make a short response.

Des Browne: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am quite happy to respond to any questions that the hon. Gentleman might wish to ask. My expectation is that the Government will be making a written ministerial statement in relation to that very matter. I thought that that would happen today, but I have not had the chance to check, as it is a machinery of government statement, rather than an issue for the MOD. I will talk to the hon. Gentleman about it, however, and it will be done before the recess.

Mr. Howarth: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that we must not stretch this too far. I have been indulgent in allowing him to get his point on the record, and we have had an answer. I think that that is probably as far as the matter should be taken.

Des Browne: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not wish to undermine your ruling, but I think that the hon. Gentleman will find the answer that he seeks in a written ministerial statement made today by the Prime Minister. It is No. 30 on the Order Paper.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No doubt the Secretary of State will hear from the hon. Gentleman if that is not what he is expecting.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The House will be aware that the MOD's annual report, which was published on 23 July, revealed important weaknesses in the preparedness of our armed forces, and the strain that they are now experiencing on operations. May I have your guidance on the importance of the MOD giving accurate information to the Vote Office on when such reports are to be published? The Vote Office was informed—and informed the shadow Defence team—that this important report would be released at 2 o'clock, but, in the event, it was finally released at 4 o'clock. A similar thing happened the previous year, when a similarly important and revealing report was snuck out at the end of a day and the House did not have an adequate opportunity to consider it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's frustration if information is not available as promptly as he, as a Front-Bench spokesman, would wish. Obviously, he must not draw me into this argument, however. He has put his point on the record, and I hope that attention will be given to it. Mr. Speaker has spoken on more than one occasion of the importance that he attaches to information being provided to Members of the House in a timely manner.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. For the second time now, the people of the southern half of Bedfordshire find themselves totally unsure about what form of local government they are going to face, given the written statement that we have had today. Given that there is now no further opportunity for oral questions to Ministers from the Department for Communities and Local Government, how would you advise me to find some certainty on this issue? It is important to the local people of Bedfordshire and, in particular, to the staff of the councils concerned.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I can only say to the hon. Gentleman that there are ways for Members of the House to continue to press the relevant Department. The fact that the House rises does not prevent questioning by correspondence or by other means. There is still a signal opportunity for hon. Members to raise matters that they feel should receive attention before Parliament rises for the summer recess. I can only commend that option to the hon. Gentleman.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not sure what more I can add on that same point of order.

Daniel Kawczynski: On that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We were assured by the Government that the statement on the local government review would be in the Vote Office at 12.30. I and many others went to try to find it, but it did not appear until after 2 o'clock. I had to be informed that Shropshire is to have a unitary authority by my secretary, who telephoned me from Shrewsbury. That is an absolute disgrace. We have campaigned on this issue for so long, and the socialists promised that they would listen to my constituents on this matter, yet this is being announced on the last day of the parliamentary Session and I have had to find out about it from my secretary. This is a gross abuse of Parliament.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The response that I have to give to the hon. Gentleman is a hybrid of the two that I have already given. Yes, of course it is important that Members should get information as swiftly as it

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

becomes available to be disseminated. At the same time, there may yet be an opportunity before the House goes into recess for the hon. Gentleman to pursue this subject further on behalf of his constituents. Governments have faced this perennial problem over the years in trying to produce information: an awful lot of it comes out at the last minute. That is an occupational hazard for the legislature and the Executive. There is still an opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to pursue the matter, however.

Milk (Pricing)

2.49 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to confer further powers on the Office of Fair Trading and the Competition Commission to investigate the prices of milk paid by retailers to producers; and for connected purposes.

I am still reeling over the issue of unitary authorities, but I shall endeavour to calm myself and introduce my ten-minute Bill on milk pricing. It is an appropriate time to do so, as the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* says that the price of milk and food is set to soar over the summer—and not just because of the flooding, but on account of the tremendous crisis in the dairy industry. It is so bad that many of our dairy farmers are going out of business, which will ultimately affect the consumer.

At the moment, many of my Shropshire farmers are paid as little as 16p a litre for the milk that goes to supermarkets. Today, I spoke to Tesco and found that it charges 58p a litre to its customers. I would like Parliament to think for a moment about the huge margin between 16p and 58p a litre. Any hon. Member representing a rural constituency will know how hard dairy farmers work. They face an unsustainable price for their milk: 16p a litre is simply not enough. That is why hundreds of dairy farmers have gone out of business and lost their livelihoods. In addition, dairy farmers face huge levels of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs red tape and bureaucracy. To cap it all, there is the tremendous crisis of bovine tuberculosis.

I asked the relevant Minister about the number of cases of bovine TB in Shropshire in the year 2000 and was given the figure of 39. In 2006, however, the number had increased to 147. We have seen a massive increase in the number of cases of bovine TB in Shropshire and, in my estimation, the Government are doing very little to tackle it. When I first became an MP, I was lobbied by my Shrewsbury farmers on many occasions to do something about the problem and to take up their cause.

I started to speak out on these issues two years ago as an individual MP. I had extensive meetings with various chief executives from various supermarkets. The first one I met was the chief executive of ASDA—and it got me absolutely nowhere. People like him were simply not prepared to acknowledge that there was a problem. They simply refused to consider the long-term ramifications for the indigenous production of milk in this country. They simply were not prepared to acknowledge the crisis.

That explains why I decided to set up the all-party group for dairy farmers—and I am very pleased to see some of its members in their places here today. In fact, we have become one of the largest such groups in Parliament. As of today, we number 157 Members from all parties. That shows the extent of feeling on this issue among all political parties; we all want to do something to ensure that the UK continues to have a dairy industry.

One group that has greatly helped me and the all-party group is the women's institute, which had adopted this issue as one of its main areas of campaigning. It organised a major petition up and

down the country, securing hundreds of thousands of signatures, which was presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman). The WI also had a series of national debates throughout the country, where it brought supermarket chief executives together with farmers and other interested parties. I participated in two of those national debates: one in the West Mid show in my constituency of Shrewsbury, the other close to Parliament, where I debated with Mr. Justin King, the Sainsbury chief executive.

The greatest publicity came not just from us politicians, but from a single individual WI member from Gloucestershire who came on a very cold January morning wearing nothing but a bikini. People were pouring bottles of milk all over her as she sat in a bath just outside the House of Commons. That went down very well, I have to say, and got us a great deal of publicity. I applaud her for doing that on such a cold day and for being prepared to be photographed in a bikini with all that milk being poured all over her.

The all-party group listened to hundreds and hundreds of hours of evidence. We have had many meetings with various interested parties. We met the Office of Fair Trading and many farming organisations, including the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers. Supermarket bosses were called as well as many consumer organisations. We have even led a cross-party delegation to Brussels to lobby the Commissioner for Agriculture, Mrs. Fischer Boel. For an arch Eurosceptic like myself, the idea of going to Brussels to ask the EU to intervene to help save the British dairy industry was quite difficult. However, I had to do so, in desperation at the lack of action by the Labour Government.

That activity and the national campaign had some results, as the supermarkets have started to feel embarrassed about this issue. I know that Tesco is leading the way in increasing the prices paid to farmers. On some occasions, it pays 22p a litre, but that affects only 450 local farmers, so we need to increase that number significantly.

I shall place the all-party dairy farmers group report in the Library. It may not be a very Conservative thing to do, but I desperately wanted to call for a regulator for supermarkets. Regrettably, there was no consensus in the group about that matter. As a Conservative, I usually do not like to interfere in market forces; it is quite an unusual thing for a Conservative to want to regulate in that way, yet we have regulators in all our major industries. On my way to Parliament earlier today, I passed the offices of Ofgem, and then there is Ofwat and Ofgas, for example. Everything is regulated apart from the supermarkets.

I would like a regulator, but I cannot get the support of my group on this issue. What we can achieve, what my Bill sets out to achieve and what we can agree upon, I believe, is more powers for the Office of Fair Trading to investigate what supermarkets pay for milk. When the OFT came before the all-party group, it said—this is set out in all our notes—that it would very much like to be able to investigate supermarkets and shine more of a spotlight on them, but that regrettably its hands were tied and it did not have the power to do so. The Bill will enable the OFT to scrutinise the supermarkets in a much better way.

Tesco has announced an extra £25 million of investment to increase the price for milk. It is also getting local brands and offering its customers the opportunity to pay more for local milk such as Dorset milk in supermarkets in Dorset. I am negotiating with Tesco to try to get Shropshire milk to be sold in Shropshire supermarkets. I urge all MPs to negotiate and lobby with Tesco to get local milk in their supermarkets from their own counties. This is a very good first step and I applaud Tesco for this measure. I will not rest until I can go to Tesco and buy Shropshire milk from my local Shropshire dairy farmers.

This Bill will place some extra pressure on the supermarkets. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Daniel Kawczynski, Tim Farron, Mr. Stephen Crabb, Ann Winterton, Sir Nicholas Winterton, Lembit Opik, Mr. Roger Williams, Mr. Christopher Fraser, David T.C. Davies, Mr. Ian Liddell-Grainger and Mr. Soames.

MILK (PRICING)

Daniel Kawczynski accordingly presented a Bill to confer further powers on the Office of Fair Trading and the Competition Commission to investigate the prices of milk paid by retailers to producers; and for connected purposes. And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 19 October, and to be printed [Bill 151].

Orders of the Day

Pensions Bill

New Clause

TEMPORARY RESTRICTION ON THE PURCHASE OF ANNUITIES

Lords amendments: No. 22B. 22C and 22D

2.59 pm

The Minister for Pensions Reform (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in the said amendments.

We agree with the Lords amendments. We have only a short time for the debate, so my opening remarks will be brief. I hope that I will secure the consent of the House to respond to the points raised and that we can discuss post-legislative scrutiny in the time allotted.

The House disagreed with Lords amendment No. 22 on annuitisation because the draft would have had undesirable effects. Subsequently, the other place did not insist on it. However, the Government had some sympathy with the aim of the amendment and accepted amendment No. 22B from the Opposition in its place. We were persuaded by the arguments.

The background is that in this House last week I announced that the cost of extending the financial assistance scheme to give pensioners more might be met by better use of the assets remaining in pension schemes, in accordance with the recommendations of Andrew Young, along with a matching contribution from the Government. I am sure that hon. Members will welcome my noble Friend Lord McKenzie's announcement yesterday that we have decided to accept the Young review's recommendation that we should not enforce a cut-off date for employer insolvency. The cut-off date of 31 August 2007, announced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (James Purnell), now Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, will not be enforced. We will consult on whether there should be any cut-off date and introduce regulations in due course.

As I said last week, we wrote to trustees to urge them to consider very carefully whether purchasing annuities is in the best interests of their members. That might well have been enough, but we accept that reinforcing that message in law has some merit. Therefore, we will take powers to prevent annuitisation by FAS qualifying schemes to ensure the greatest benefit to the greatest number of pension scheme members.

Amendment No. 22B has the same broad objective as amendment No. 22, but achieves it without the difficulties of the previous version. Amendment No. 22B puts a hold on annuitisation for the benefit of members of qualifying pension schemes hoping to see the extra funds raised by the assets within schemes matched by the Government. However, it also allows trustees to buy annuities, where appropriate, if they have the approval of the FAS scheme manager, who in law is the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. That is a sensible and flexible approach, although clearly we will need to give careful thought to the circumstances in which it might happen and how scheme managers exercise their discretion.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for his concise introduction to the amendments.

As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker—this is probably about as much as I can say on the matter—the debate on many of the amendments concerning the lifeboat fund has been ended by the invocation of the Parliament Acts. In short, I believe that the Government realised they were losing the arguments and decided to shut down the debate. That is a blatant affront, not only to this House but to the victims who have lost their pensions. This is probably our last opportunity to debate this Pensions Bill, although the joy of my job and the Minister's is that another Pensions Bill is always just around the corner.

Only recently, our new Prime Minister told the nation that he believed in

"restoring power to Parliament and rebuilding public trust in democracy."

He said:

"I want to lead a Government humble enough to know its place—where I will always strive to be—and that is on the people's side."

He should tell that to the 125,000 people who were looking to the lifeboat fund for help. The big clunking fist has crashed down, and the Government have invoked the Parliament Acts and stopped any further discussion. They have, in effect, torpedoed the lifeboat.

Even before the Government did that, however, there were dark threats from Government sources that if the lifeboat fund amendments did get through, they might abandon the whole Bill, leaving victims with even less money than they would have received under the Government's latest proposals. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to dissociate himself from such threats. I can assure him that the campaign to get proper help to those victims will continue both inside and outside Parliament. If the Prime Minister thinks that he has heard the last of this issue, he is very much mistaken.

The amendments on annuitisation are the remaining vestiges of the raft of lifeboat fund amendments. It is also perhaps worth reminding the House that that approach to bulk annuity purchase has been advocated by the Conservatives for at least a couple of years and by campaigners such as Ros Altmann for even longer. Can the Minister make an estimate of the pension fund assets that have already been committed to annuity purchase in the time scale and are therefore no longer available to provide direct help to the victims?

The Minister touched on the recent report by Andrew Young and his team. It is worth quickly reviewing some of the major conclusions on this subject. On page 13, they concluded that there was some £1.7 billion of uncommitted assets in schemes eligible for FAS assistance that are in the process of winding up. What we do not know is where they are in that process at this precise moment. Andrew Young also concluded in chapter 4:

"The current process of annuitisation on a scheme by scheme basis is unlikely to offer the best use of residual scheme assets."

I am delighted that that is now accepted by hon. Members on both sides of the House in considering what should happen next to those remaining pension assets.

The latest amendments are a compromise. I am delighted to hear that the Minister is prepared to accept them. They were drafted by my colleague Lord Skelmersdale in the other place and they cover the issues of real concern to hon. Members on both sides of the House. The most important is amendment No. 22B, which places a temporary restriction on the purchase of annuities. It would fair to describe the others as consequential. The noble Lord McKenzie said:

"It strikes a pragmatic approach by putting a hold on annuitisation for the benefit of all members of qualifying pension schemes who hope to see the extra funds generated by the assets within their schemes matched by the Government, while allowing trustees to purchase annuities with the permission of the scheme manager where it would be appropriate to do so."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 July 2007; Vol. 694, c. 711.]

I have some questions, which the Minister may be able to deal with today, with the leave of the House, or in correspondence. First, the Young report talks about total unallocated assets of £1.7 billion in pension funds within the FAS. What proportion of those assets is likely to be affected by the proposed regulations? Secondly, the Government have promised to publish regulations. I think that that was made clear by Lord McKenzie. Can the Minister give me an idea of the time scale during which he expects to be able to do so? Thirdly, the Minister told us that he had written to trustees. Is he prepared to put a copy of that letter in the Library and perhaps supply copies to Front-Bench spokesmen in this and the other House so that we can see exactly what he has said to them?

May I also touch on the issue of circumstances in which some trustees may wish to proceed with purchasing annuities in the usual way? That was dealt with by Lord Skelmersdale in the other place when he made the point that his principal amendment gave the FAS scheme manager—the Secretary of State—discretion to allow annuities to be purchased in

"some—I expect rare—instances. For example, that could be where a scheme is only lightly under-funded and therefore members are unlikely to benefit from the FAS overall."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 July 2007; Vol. 694, c. 713.]

I must say in parentheses, however, that one wonders why they might be in that situation in the first place. Will the Minister confirm today or in writing that it is his understanding that the scheme manager—the Secretary of State—would permit such a purchase only in rare circumstances, and usually when there were merely small amounts of underfunding in a scheme? If that is not his understanding, will he tell us what circumstances he envisages triggering the purchase of annuities?

My understanding of the Government position—I am happy to allow the Minister to intervene if I am overselling it—is that in almost every case they are now expecting trustees in schemes that are in the FAS not to bulk-purchase annuities for the foreseeable future, and that in the rare cases when they might want to purchase annuities they would almost certainly be almost totally funded and would seek the permission of the scheme manager.

There is consensus between Ministers and Conservative Front Benchers that from this day forward the bulk purchase of annuities for FAS-based schemes will be rare, and that assets will be husbanded with a view not to buying annuities but to providing benefits directly to scheme members. On that basis, I commend the amendments—I call them the Skelmersdale amendments—as providing a sensible and practical resolution of an honourable and decent difference of opinion on how to approach the issue. I hope that they are workable, I look forward to seeing the regulations in draft, and I would be interested to know when they are likely to appear.

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to debate this amendment and those that we shall soon address. As the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) made clear, the amendment on annuities, which this House debated last week and which the House of Lords rejected and replaced with those before us today, was part of a wider raft of amendments on the lifeboat fund. I can do no better than quote the remarks in the House of Lords debate yesterday of my party colleague Lord Oakeshott of Seagrove Bay. He quoted the conclusion of the Young review. On page 29 of the review it is stated that

"the current FAS scheme is not the best way of ensuring good value, as there is a complicated process and benefit structure, considerable duplication of administration, insufficient risk-pooling etc."

In other words, even the Government's own review comes to that conclusion. Lord Oakeshott further said, on other amendments with which this one had been grouped:

"One hundred and twenty-five thousand members of failed pension schemes have been robbed twice: first when their funds collapsed, and now by a government ruse to block House of Lords"—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 July 2007; Vol. 694, c. 708.]

debate on the Pensions Bill. I wholeheartedly agree with Lord Oakeshott's sentiments—and I also pay tribute to his work in campaigning for the 125,000 pensioners whose pension rights have been removed and who have campaigned so assiduously.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I heard what both Front-Bench spokesmen said about a Government ruse in relation to the Parliament Act 1911, but financial privilege is regularly invoked, so this is nothing new. It is done in respect of a fair number of Bills where the other place makes finance proposals. Why does the hon. Gentleman say that it is a ruse when it is a regular event?

Danny Alexander: The situation has not been made at all clear, and although privilege might occasionally have been invoked it has not been used often in the past few years.

Mr. Waterson: According to my research, the 1911 Act has been invoked only on seven occasions, and on Bills to do with matters such as the Welsh Church, Home Rule, war crimes, sexual offences and hunting. It is hardly an everyday occurrence.

3.15 pm

Danny Alexander: I am grateful for that intervention. The Minister referred to Lords amendment No. 22B, which would provide support for members of the FAS by blocking the bulk-purchase of annuities using the assets that remain in schemes. Its purpose is to allow the unused funds that are left in the pension schemes to be used to improve the benefits within the FAS. It is a great shame that the Minister is still unwilling to state that he agrees with the position set out by the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives and, more significantly from the Minister's point of view, by many of his Back Benchers. The right, just and decent thing to do would be to ensure that those whose pension schemes collapsed before the introduction of the Pension Protection Fund and who therefore benefit under the FAS should receive benefits at the same level as those in the PPF. We have consistently articulated that position. That is the purpose to which any funds that can be husbanded through the judicious and speedy application of regulations under the amendment should be put. That is what the 125,000 people, organised so admirably by Dr. Ros Altmann and others, have been campaigning for. Much anger was expressed on this matter in the debate in the other place, but such anger is more strongly felt by the 125,000 people who believe that, unaccountably, they will have to wait longer than they had expected to get what they regard as a just and decent settlement.

We welcome the amendment. In last week's debate, I observed that what was then amendment No. 22 served the Government's purpose. At that time, the Minister denied that. I am delighted that common sense has prevailed and that the Government have accepted this revised version of that amendment.

I have a couple of questions about how the Minister intends to implement it. Lord McKenzie has made it clear that the Government intend to introduce regulations under the amendment. How quickly do they intend to do so? Clearly, the regulations are subject to a negative procedure. Can they be introduced during the summer recess, or will that have to wait until October? As has been said, time is of the essence. According to the Young review, £1.7 billion of assets remain in the schemes. As the Young review also made clear, and as was made clear in last week's debate, any delay could result in some of the funds being annuitised by scheme managers.

Mr. O'Brien: I agree that it is important that the rules are introduced quickly. We will use the negative procedure, and we will seek to move as quickly as possible as we want them to be in place by the autumn. The House must have an opportunity to debate that, if it wishes to do so. However, although I agree with the hon. Gentleman on this, the consequence will be that we will not have a consultation period; we will just introduce the rules. We will be happy to share them with Opposition spokespersons in advance.

Danny Alexander: I am grateful to the Minister for the speed with which he is seeking to act and for his generosity in suggesting a consultation, which I would welcome. He is right—time is of the essence and we should get on with this. If that means that a shorter than usual consultation period is necessary, or no consultation period at all, we Liberal Democrats would be perfectly happy with that, given the imperative in these circumstances.

If I have read amendment No. 22B correctly, it places a restriction on the purchase of annuities for a maximum of nine months. Subsection (1) of the proposed new clause states:

> "The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision for securing that, during the period of 9 months beginning with the date on which the regulations come into force, the trustees of the relevant pension schemes are prohibited from purchasing, or agreeing to purchase, annuities on behalf of qualifying members".

It was perhaps Lord Skelmersdale who came up with the nine-month period, but the Government obviously agreed to it. Does the Minister think that that is the length of time needed for the Government to introduce and act on the conclusions of the Young review? Given that the House has reached a positive consensus on this very narrow issue, it would be a shame if the limited time scale specified in the amendment meant that, although bulk annuitisation was restricted for that period, it was not until after that period had elapsed that progress was made on using the assets in those funds. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that point.

Like our colleagues in the House of Lords, we Liberal Democrats in this place are more than happy to accept these amendments, which represent a good step forward. I wish only to register my deep sadness that they are not part of the wider lifeboat scheme under which the original amendment was introduced.

Mr. Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I just want to make a few points. I agree with what the hon. Members for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander) said about the lifeboat fund. It is a shame that it is not in the amendments; none the less, I do support them.

To my mind, the original House of Lords amendment was perfectly adequate, and I do not understand why there has been such a hoo-hah about changing it. I am concerned about subsection (2) of the proposed new clause in Lords amendment No. 22B, which states:

> "The regulations must make provision...for authorising the scheme manager to approve the purchase of any such annuities if the scheme manager thinks it appropriate to do so."

We are talking about a nine-month period; however, speed is of the essence in dealing with these issues. One scheme in my constituency, operated by a solvent employer, illustrates the slow crawl through this legislation that has taken place to get some justice. As the Bill progressed, the Minister rightly agreed that that employer should be covered by the financial assistance scheme, which it previously had not been. The trustees were asking that annuities be bought for those in the scheme who were retiring. Had that change not been made when it was, that scheme would have been annuitised and the assets lost. There is therefore an urgent need to get this situation sorted out.

The original amendment would have imposed a straightforward ban for nine months on annuitising such schemes. I can understand why some slight wriggle room has been provided in certain circumstances, but I am concerned that in cases where trustees want to annuitise a scheme, they will have to

make an application to the Secretary of State, who will presumably have to investigate the particular circumstances of that scheme before deciding whether to allow annuitisation. That is an extra burden of bureaucracy that the original amendment did not impose; it simply provided for a nine-month ban until the situation has been sorted out. Presumably, all the scheme assets would then have gone into the general FAS pot, which is a better approach. Does the Minister feel that amendment No. 22B imposes an extra bureaucratic layer that could lead to delay, and could require the Secretary of State to investigate many schemes that it would otherwise not have been necessary to investigate?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: With the leave of the House, I seek to reply to this debate and to some of the points raised. Let me first deal with what should perhaps be described as the political knockabout points, before moving on to the serious stuff.

Various claims were made about the Parliament Act 1911, which has a number of different provisions. It was invoked, as described by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), when the other place refused to accept particular pieces of legislation regularly passed by this House. That probably happened on about seven occasions—indeed, I think that I was part of the process with one of them—but that is not what we are talking about here. Rather, we are talking about the invoking of financial privilege, which happens to be dealt with in the 1911 Act, but which has been regularly invoked in this place over many years. It is therefore an entirely different matter from the point raised by the hon. Gentleman. The parliamentary procedures are different, and such invoking in the other place merely means that the Lords would have to table a differently worded amendment.

It was therefore possible—I assumed that Opposition Members knew this—to table a differently worded amendment, if the Opposition really want to bring back their lifeboat proposal. Frankly, however, it was pretty well sunk by the Young report, so they were better off not doing that. The lifeboat proposal was torpedoed not by the Government, but by the Young report, which said that the basis on which it was framed—that pensions and the various insurance assets were unclaimed and lying there, and could easily be accessed—faced impediments so great that it was not a realistic option.

Mr. Waterson: I do not want to follow the Minister down the route of discussing the 1911 Act, because I suspect that I would be ruled out of order. However, I remind him that—amendments or no amendments, and whatever their wording—if the Government had accepted the principle of a lifeboat fund and getting help to people sooner rather than later, as we suggested, we would have been happy to accept any drafting from the Government. It is because they set their face against that principle and the proposed timetable that we are where we are. The Minister referred to dealing with knockabout political points before moving on to the serious stuff. The serious issue is the people who need help from the FAS but are not getting it, and might not get it for some time.

Mr. O'Brien: The Government did not accept the lifeboat scheme for the very reason that we set out, which the Young review confirmed—that the basis of the scheme was full of financial holes. The Young report stated clearly that the idea that sitting in pension and insurance funds are assets that could easily be accessed is unrealistic as an option to help those pensioners.

Danny Alexander: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I do not want to labour this point and I am conscious of the time, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Danny Alexander: I want to have one last brief go at this point, and then I shall allow the Minister to move on. The Government still have not stated clearly why they do not want to allow FAS beneficiaries to receive benefits at the Pension Protection Fund level. We Liberal Democrats have put forward a range of options for funding that, and the financial cost would be slim, given the figures that we have heard mentioned in the Lords, such as £25 million a year for the first 10 years. If the issue is purely a financial one, that figure seems like pretty slim pickings, given that we have just heard that billions more are to be spent on aircraft carriers.

Mr. O'Brien: It was the Young report, not the Government, that torpedoed the lifeboat, but it was pretty leaky anyway. Rafts were mentioned in various analogies, and the lifeboat was a cobbled-together raft that sank of its own volition. We warned the Opposition that it would sink, and it did. Let us move on and see how, realistically, we can help the pensioners involved, because that is the important thing.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander) asks, reasonably, why the funding will not be to the PPF level. The answer is that the PPF is essentially an insurance scheme and people make contributions to it, as a result of which they are entitled to payments from it. If we were to go to PPF levels, that would have to be funded. The hon. Gentleman has made it clear that the Liberal Democrats would be happy to put Government funding into that. That is a straightforward point of view, and I understand and respect it. However, the Conservatives have always said that they would not put loads of Government money into the scheme. They would not be prepared to spend an extra £1 billion. They are silent on that point, and as far as they are concerned, there would be no extra money. They claim that the funding would somehow be obtained from the unclaimed assets, but that idea has now been torpedoed.

3.30 pm

The various claims being made by the Opposition parties differ. I give the hon. Gentleman credit for saying straightforwardly that he would spend more taxpayers' money. However, I think that we should be cautious about deciding to spend large amounts of Government money on ensuring that those who have not paid the insurance premiums into the pot, as the people in the PPF scheme have paid, should get the same benefits because the Government chipped in. We have to get the right balance between the rights of the

pensioners and the rights of the taxpayers. By saying that they would not spend large amounts of taxpayers' money, the Conservatives recognise that that balance needs to be struck, but they claim that they can magic the money from somewhere else. I do not accept that.

The claim is made that a threat has somehow been made to withdraw the increase to 80 per cent. if the Bill goes into the spill-over period. That was the substance of a letter that Conservative Front Benchers sent out earlier today, but it is complete nonsense. It is true that I warned in the last debate that if the Bill was delayed into the spill-over period the increase from 60 per cent. to 80 per cent. in the cover under the financial assistance scheme would also be delayed, and pensioners would not get it over the summer—and I think that they deserve it. That is why I am pleased that the Opposition have agreed to the amendments and that the Bill can receive Royal Assent so that the increase to 80 per cent. can begin to be paid by the FAS operational unit. That will happen within days of Royal Assent, which I hope will occur shortly.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne made several other points, which I shall address briefly. He mentioned that Lord Skelmersdale had drafted the amendment, but for the sake of clarity I suggest that he had a little help from his friends. As far as the Young report is concerned, the total assets are £1.7 billion. He asked what percentage was likely to be effective, and the answer is that almost all of that sum will be covered, as he suggested.

As for the regulations and the timescale, I have already said that we would like to introduce the regulations as quickly as possible. We will happily show them to Opposition Front Benchers, but we want to put them into operation quickly. That means that we will not consult widely on them. I am happy to put a copy of the letter that I sent last week in the Library, and send one to Opposition Front Benchers. I apologise for not ensuring that that had been done before.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether seeking the consent of the Secretary of State was likely to be rare. From our point of view, it would be rare. It might happen if an otherwise fully funded scheme was close to being wound up, but found that it had a small gap. It would therefore not stand to benefit very much from the FAS, so the trustees might ask the Secretary of State whether they could annuitise in those circumstances. The Secretary of State would look at the facts and take a view. Such circumstances would be rare, which is why we do not want annuitisation to proceed for funds engaged with the FAS—and that would be the purpose of the amendments.

The only other question that I was asked had to do with the nine-month period, and I can tell the House that we are looking at the nine months from September. We hope that Young will report in November, and we expect to be able to make some decisions fairly quickly thereafter. We do not yet know the full terms of the Young report, so we will have to wait and see what it contains, but we want to put various alternative courses of action before the House as quickly as possible. Details of any substitute scheme will be made known in regulations put in place before the nine months elapse.

Finally, despite the bit of political knockabout that we had, I am grateful for the positive reaction of the hon. Member for Eastbourne to the amendments, and I hope that he will adopt a similar approach to the next group.

Lords amendments agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 28.

Mr. O'Brien: I beg to move, That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendment No. 28 but proposes amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.

I shall be brief. We considered that Lord Fowler's amendment No. 28 was unnecessary, not least because we have already made commitments to keep under review the reforms enacted by this Bill. We also have reservations about the exact terms of the amendment. Although we may have an idea about what the term "post-legislative scrutiny" means, we are reluctant to commit the Secretary of State to complying with a duty until there is a clear understanding of what that might entail. No final agreement has been reached about what post-legislative scrutiny would entail, so we have proposed instead that the Secretary of State present to Parliament a report on the operation of the Act that will give Parliament an opportunity to consider and debate the findings.

We also took the view that 2011 would be too early for a review to be conducted, as only the measures relating to new qualifying conditions for state pensions would have come into effect by then. Many of the provisions in the Bill would not have come into effect by that date, so we suggested in the other place that the Secretary of State should present the report by the end of 2017. That would follow a period of some years when all the measures, apart from the increase in state pension age, had had time to bed in. It would also allow us to consider whether we were taking the appropriate steps to ensure the smooth implementation of the state pension age changes in 2024.

It was evident from yesterday's debate in the other place that their Lordships were dissatisfied with the proposed date for the Secretary of State's review. We now propose, therefore, that he should present his report by the end of 2014. I understand that Conservative Front-Bench spokespersons in the other place would be satisfied with that compromise, and for completeness I should tell the House that Government amendment (b), to clause 28, is purely consequential. Clause 28 defines the extent of the measures in the Bill, and the amendment would ensure that any review of the operation of the Act in due course would take account of the provisions as they relate to Northern Ireland.

I believe that the proposed amendments in lieu are sensible, and consistent with the principles of good administration. I hope that they command the support of the House.

Mr. Waterson: As the Minister has explained, the Government amendments are, in effect, a compromise arising from the Lords debates, and on behalf of the official Opposition, I welcome them. Lord Fowler made a powerful case in the Lords for the principle of post-legislative scrutiny. In recent times, we have heard a lot about pre-legislative scrutiny, and that of course

has its place. However, one can actually sustain the argument that scrutinising the effects of legislation after the event is every bit as important, if not more so.

In a powerful speech in the Lords on 11 July, Lord Fowler made his case extremely well, based on his massive experience in such matters. He gave two specific examples. The first related to the Social Security Act 1986, the state earnings-related pension scheme and subsequent issues such as compensation claims and the non-issue of leaflets. In that case, he thought that post-legislative scrutiny would have made a significant difference.

Lord Fowler's second example related to some of the issues dealt with by the parliamentary ombudsman, the High Court, the European Court and Select Committees in recent times. It is not for me to rehearse all the arguments on this occasion. The issues are currently before the courts, but he uses them to show how a post-legislative scrutiny procedure could have picked up some potential problems and some of the misinformation on the basis of which the ombudsman found that there had been maladministration.

Lord Fowler came in for a certain amount of criticism from the Minister in the other place for leaving rather vague the issue of who would actually perform such scrutiny. However, as Lord Fowler said:

"The amendment would give the Government maximum flexibility."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 July 2007; Vol. 693, c. 1410.]

There is some merit in that view.

Most important is the common-sense point that every time we pass pensions legislation in the House the law of unintended consequences runs through it. It was trumpeted that one of the principal aims of the Pensions Act 2004 was the protection and enhancement of defined benefit schemes. In fact, the measure accelerated the closure of such schemes to new entrants and even to existing members, so I permit myself a wry smile when I consider the arguments in the Lords about the time scale for post-legislative scrutiny. Is it not interesting that within barely two years of the 2004 Act the Government's White Paper announced a review of its provisions? Any Government worth their salt would look closely at such legislation in a much shorter time scale than that proposed in either the original amendment or the compromise amendment. It is ironic that on this very day the Government published the results of the regulatory review.

We on the Conservative Benches are keen supporters of Lord Fowler's proposition that major legislation deserves proper post-legislative scrutiny. I join Lord Fowler in noting the fact that the new Prime Minister has said that he wants to restore the role of Parliament, and we welcome the Government's deathbed conversion to the principle. I understand that Lord Fowler and his colleagues in the Lords are content with the amendment proposed; therefore I am too, so we shall not oppose it. However, if and when we win the next election we shall certainly carry out our own thorough review of this and other recent pensions legislation.

Danny Alexander: The activities in the other place to add the concept of post-legislative scrutiny to the Bill played a useful role. The work done by Lord Fowler, supported by Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Cross-Bencher colleagues, in insisting on that concept has in the end managed to wheedle from the Government a useful amendment in response. That goes some way towards meeting the objectives set out in the Lords and on that basis I welcome the Government's amendment.

The Bill will have a very long-term impact indeed. The main impact of the legislation will be felt not in one, two, three or four years' time, but for generations to come. It is appropriate therefore that there be scrutiny of the Bill's impact once it receives Royal Assent and becomes law. That is true for a number of reasons, the first of which is the point that Lord Fowler made in his speech in the other place about perceiving and acting on errors or mistakes that may have been made. Government amendment (a) will allow the possibility of proper scrutiny in the future of some of the flaws in the Bill that my hon. Friends and I have highlighted during its passage. The Government deny that there are flaws, but the truth will become certain only with the passage of time. Government amendment (a) will allow time to elapse before those issues can be properly examined.

3.45 pm

I hope in particular that, in implementing Government amendment (a) in relation to reviewing and preparing a report on the operation of the Act, the Secretary of State, whoever that is by 2014, will have regard to questions about the extent to which means-testing is still a pervasive part of the system by that date. No doubt we will debate this when the next pensions Bill comes down the track—one is expected in the next Session—but I remain of the view that the extent to which means-testing or mass means-testing, is still a pervasive part of the system, should be considered. I believe very much that that could well undermine personal accounts, the establishment of the delivery authority for which is part of the Bill.

The Liberal Democrats have concerns about what the way in which the Bill operates will mean for the rights of many women pensioners to have access to a full state pension—a matter which we debated briefly last week. Again, I hope that the Secretary of State can include that in his report. The Minister rightly referred in his opening remarks to the increases in the state pension age that will follow the Bill. Again, reviews of the proper operation of the implementation of that will be important.

The Bill relates to the uprating of pensions in line with earnings. We have been given a date—I think that it is 2012—but we have also been told that the uprating might not happen for two or three years after that. It might well not happen until the end of that Parliament. Although I am not able to predict the dates on which Parliaments begin and end, it is possible that the uprating in line with earnings will not start until 2015. I hope that the timing of the report before the end of 2014 will, if necessary—I hope that it will not be necessary—act as a strong corrective to any governmental wish to delay yet further the implementation of the uprating in line with earnings.

The Minister will know that the Liberal Democrats have called for that uprating to take place immediately, and I remain of that view. Even if the Minister is not of

that view, I hope that by including the report in the Bill under Government amendment (a) and by requiring the Government to produce such a report and bring it before Parliament, where we would expect to debate it, so that it could come under scrutiny and pressure from hon. Members about possible failure to deliver the content of the Bill, we will ensure that Ministers act quickly to do the decent thing in relation to the uprating in line with earnings and introduce it, at least by their own timetable, inadequate though the Liberal Democrats believe that is. With those few words, I say that the Liberal Democrats will be happy for the House to pass these amendments.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): With regard to post-legislative scrutiny, when provisions come before the House, many Members are at a disadvantage in so far as we do not have the time to go through the detail. Would the Minister like to give an undertaking to ask the National Audit Office to produce a report that covers certain key sections to inform Members, so that they can fully take part in any scrutiny debate in the House?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I begin by thanking both Opposition spokespersons, and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins), for supporting the amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. and learned Gentleman should seek the leave of the House to reply to the debate.

Mr. O'Brien: Forgive me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I beg to ask leave of the House to reply to the debate.

These are important amendments. It is perhaps fitting, as we move towards the conclusion of the Bill, that the amendment has been dealt with in a spirit of compromise. That is important because pensions, above all, require a consensus to be built around long-term planning to develop security for the elderly in the future.

The Bill will enable a lot of legislation to be passed—some of it potentially quite controversial, such as the provisions to increase the retirement age. We have been able to put those provisions through the House because the Turner report, and those who worked on it, provided the basis for a consensus to be built around pensions policy. There were some issues of political controversy during the course of the Bill. In the course of reviewing the Bill, perhaps a Minister will look at some of those issues, as well looking at the areas where we all agreed. It was important that we had that level of agreement and that we were able to get through some potentially very difficult issues. I extend the Government's thanks to Opposition Front-Bench Members for their broad approach to many of the issues.

May I also place on record my thanks—and those of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (James Purnell), and other Ministers who dealt with the Bill before I did—for the way in which officials briefed us and ensured that we were able to find our way through some quite complex legislation? Of course, I look forward to working with the hon. Members for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander) on the next Bill, which is likely to come forward fairly soon. I will consider the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth for the NAO to be involved. I will not give a commitment at this point, but it is an interesting suggestion and the Government will consider it.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way for what I imagine will be the last time during the passage of the Bill. May I join him and express the thanks of the official Opposition to the officials, the Clerks, all hon. Members who have spoken during the various stages of the Bill, the Minister's predecessors and the previous Secretary of State? Any blame for decisions about the Bill that we think were wrong is attached entirely to Ministers. We are very grateful to everybody else.

Mr. O'Brien: Thank you.

Danny Alexander: May I add some remarks from the Liberal Democrat Benches to follow the remarks of the Minister and the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson)? Although I have not been associated with the Bill for very long, my hon. Friends the Members for Yeovil (Mr. Laws) and for Solihull (Lorely Burt) were involved in the Committee stage and I would like to express our gratitude to the officials, the Clerks and so on, all of whom have assisted with the passage of the Bill. Although the consensus has not always been complete, there has been a model of working to achieve that. There may be a deal more controversy with the next Bill, but I look forward to the efforts that the Minister has said he will make to build consensus in that instance too.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank the hon. Gentleman. The press will no doubt report the arguments. I suppose that, in a democracy, debate is what creates stories for the media. However, the real story has been that a difficult and controversial issue has been dealt with sensibly by Members. We have reached a consensus. We have put forward one piece of legislation, which has broad support. I hope that, in due course, the following piece of legislation, which will build on this Bill, will be passed in the spirit of continued co-operation and good will. We still have a lot of work to do on pensions. It will take a lot of effort, but the good will is there to make sure that we provide for the pensioners of the future.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment No. 28 agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I now have to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day on a Question relating to immigration. The Ayes were 285, the Noes were 52, so the Question was agreed to.

I shall also announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day on a Question relating to children and young persons. The Ayes were 277, the Noes were 186, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division Lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO INDUSTRY

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Order [18 July] and Standing Order No. 118(6) (Delegated Legislation Committees).

That this House authorises the Secretary of State to pay, by way of financial assistance under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982, in respect of post office network change to 2011, a sum exceeding £10 million and up to £465 million to Post Office Ltd.—*[Mr. Michael Foster.]*

Question agreed to.

Statistics Board

3.55 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Angela Eagle): I beg to move,

That this House endorses the nomination of Sir Michael Scholar KCB for appointment as Chair of the Statistics Board.

I commend Sir Michael Scholar to the House as the chair of the board created by the Statistics and Registration Service Bill, which is now awaiting Royal Assent. Sir Michael was nominated by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer after an open competition in line with the principles laid out by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. In recommending Sir Michael to the House, I draw Members' attention to his extensive, successful career in Government and academia, and of course, the recommendation of his candidature by the Select Committee on the Treasury following its pre-appointment hearing on Wednesday 18 July.

In recommending Sir Michael for the role, the Treasury Committee said in its ninth report that

"he has demonstrated to us his commitment to the independence, integrity and importance of statistics".

I also draw Members' attention to the strong support offered for Sir Michael's appointment during the final stage of the Statistics and Registration Service Bill by Members on all Benches in the other place.

As Members will be aware, the appointment is the first of its kind; confirmation to the post is subject to a pre-appointment hearing, and this debate, which may result in a Division, in accordance with the direction set out in the consultation document, "The Governance of Britain", is also a first. I note, too, the recommendations in the Select Committee report relating to public appointments more generally, and the proposals in the consultation document. The Government welcome the Committee's views and its interest in the subject. We intend to take time to consider the recommendations, and we will publish a full response to the Select Committee in due course.

I thank the Treasury Committee for the invaluable role that it has played, and for the speed with which it was able to progress the issue, which ensured that the House had an opportunity to vote on Sir Michael's appointment before the recess. The Treasury Committee, under the able chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (John McFall), has helped us a great deal, enabling us to move forward in a short space of time, and I thank him and his Committee members for that. I reiterate our support for Sir Michael, who was nominated by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and endorsed by the Treasury Committee following a full and rigorous selection process. He is an excellent nominee for the first Statistics Board chair.

3.57 pm

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): Before I turn to the nomination of Sir Michael Scholar, may I express my support for the broad principle behind the process—the principle of ensuring greater parliamentary involvement in public appointments, particularly the appointment of the chairman of the Statistics Board? It would be difficult for me not to do

[Mr. David Gauke]

so, given that when considering the Statistics and Registration Service Bill in Committee I tabled amendments calling for much greater parliamentary involvement in appointments to the board, which of course includes the chairman. Unfortunately, although the proposals were supported by my hon. Friends, they were opposed by the Government. The hon. Member for Wentworth (John Healey), who was then the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, stated:

"It is appropriate that Ministers play a role in appointments, because it is an Executive function."

When pressed on whether there was a role for confirmation hearings, he said:

"That is not a matter for the Government."—[*Official Report*, Statistics and Registration Service Public Bill Committee, 16 January 2007; c. 68.]

I raised the issue again on 2 July with the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury. I asked about an increased role for Parliament in major public appointments, including the appointment of members of the Statistics Board. She responded:

"Clearly, Parliament will not have an added role and not in respect of the initial board appointments."

She went on to say that

"A proper appointments process has to be in place"

for April 2008, and that

"It may then be for Parliament to decide...how it wishes to ensure adequate scrutiny of the new department's activities."—[*Official Report*, 2 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 709.]

I assume that when the Exchequer Secretary made that statement she did not know that the Prime Minister would the next day announce the change of process and specifically that there would be a parliamentary vote on the appointment of the chairman of the Statistics Board. I should be grateful to know whether the Exchequer Secretary was consulted on the matter, whether she was aware of any rumours, and when she first knew or suspected that the process would change.

Two Ministers have stated that parliamentary involvement was not a matter for the Government. We learn from the excellent report published by the Treasury Committee that on 13 July its Chairman, the right hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (John McFall), who is in his place, was informed by the Treasury of the forthcoming announcement of a nominee and that there would be an opportunity to undertake a hearing before that appointment and a vote in Parliament. So clearly the Government have been involved, and I welcome the process. Some of us have called for it for some time.

I turn to the appointment of Sir Michael Scholar and the evidence taken by the Treasury Committee. In its report published earlier this week, the Committee highlighted its role in reviewing public appointments in respect of the Monetary Policy Committee. Both the Exchequer Secretary and I are former and recent members of that Select Committee and have been involved in many such cases. The methodology used in those cases, which is being used in the present case, entails considering two aspects: first, professional competence, and secondly, personal independence. In respect of Sir Michael Scholar's professional competence, as the Exchequer Secretary rightly said, he has had a long and distinguished career in the higher reaches of the civil service, and he has considerable experience also in the City and in business and academia. His extensive experience is important, given the stresses and strains in the statistical service.

On the same day as the appointment of Sir Michael was published by the Treasury Committee, a report on the efficiency savings of the Treasury's departments was also published, following a review by the Treasury Sub-Committee. I pay tribute to the Sub-Committee, under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon). He highlighted some of the issues that will need to be addressed by the chairman of the Statistics Board, derived from the evidence received by the Sub-Committee indicating some of the strains on the Office for National Statistics, which is described as an organisation under intense pressure. The Committee states:

"That pressure arises from the combined effect of budgetary restraint, the requirement to meet stretching efficiency targets for monetary savings, headcount reductions and relocation, the ambitious modernisation programme including re-engineering of the National Accounts, the need to prepare for the 2011 census and the preparations for legislative change, including the creation of the new Statistics Board".

The report goes on to say that

"the combination of demands creates an exceptional burden".

As chairman of the Statistics Board, Sir Michael will be required to address some of those matters. His experience as a senior civil servant will stand him in good stead.

The second aspect that the Treasury Committee traditionally considers is independence. The oral hearing during which Sir Michael gave evidence to the Committee focused heavily on his independence. It was suggested to him that some might say that as a perhaps naturally discreet career civil servant, of whom the *Financial Times* wrote that

"his reputation among establishment figures is already high",

his main challenge will be to show that his is an independent voice. That is clearly significant. Some might also raise concerns about the fact that he is the father of Mr. Tom Scholar, a civil servant who has returned from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington to become the Prime Minister's chief of staff at No. 10 Downing street.

Nevertheless, the Treasury Committee was satisfied, and I believe rightly so, with Sir Michael's independence, not only on the basis that if Caesar's wife must be above suspicion, so must the chief of staff's father, but on the evidence of what he said in the course of the hearing, particularly about the most controversial issue debated during the passage of the Bill—pre-release practice. I have no intention of dwelling on that but, in brief terms, many of us believe—Conservative Members, Liberal Democrat Members, the House of Lords, which has shown it on at least two occasions, and most experts in the field—that pre-release policy should be determined by the Statistics Board and that it should be somewhat shorter than the 24 hours that the Government eventually settled on as the maximum period.

Sir Michael was questioned about that because the Government's position has been that Ministers should decide—albeit, now, after consultation with the board. When asked about his position by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks, he stated that he would prefer to have a shorter pre-release period, and said:

"I am aware it is still pretty much out of line with international practice and the recommendation of the UN and so forth."

When asked whether he thought that the board, as opposed to Ministers, should decide pre-release practice, he responded:

"I would have preferred that to be the case, yes."

Reading the transcript, one can detect a sense of reticence on his part in not wishing to intervene in this controversial area, but when pressed he was clear and unambiguous. I think, therefore, that we can be reassured as to Sir Michael's independence.

However, there are one or two questions for the Government, who have been forced by defeats in the House of Lords to concede—although they have not gone nearly far enough—that they have to consult the board on pre-release access. Given that the board recommends a maximum pre-release period of less than 24 hours, which is what the Prime Minister announced on 3 July, and that that is the view of the chairman of the board, would the Government be prepared so to reduce it? If not, the whole consultation process would appear to be something of a sham. That would be damaging to the credibility of Sir Michael Scholar in his role of chairman of the Statistics Board, damaging to the board as a whole, and damaging to the reputation for independence of statistics in this country.

The appointment of Sir Michael is welcome, because he is clearly a very able man who showed, in the course of the Treasury Committee hearing, that he is a man of independence. However, there is an important question for the Government, who will have to listen to Sir Michael if they are in any way to protect our statistics' reputation for independence.

4.8 pm

John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday 13 July, I received a call from the Chancellor asking if the Treasury Committee would hold a pre-confirmation hearing into the appointment of the new chair of the Statistics Board if the appointment was made on the subsequent Monday. I was pleased to do that, because this is a new constitutional arrangement and it is important that Parliament, particularly its Select Committees, have more power. I pay tribute to the fellow members of my Committee and particularly to its staff, who have been under quite a lot of pressure in the past few months. We have had many reports to put out. Indeed, in the past few days, we have agreed reports on the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, on private equity, and on unclaimed assets. The staff were very willing and able to prepare for this pre-appointment hearing.

Sir Michael came before us on Wednesday 18 July, and we published our report on his nomination on Monday of this week. That report, and a transcript of the evidence we took from him, is available in the House, and I would like to make three short points about it in my speech. The first concerns Sir Michael's evidence, the second, the challenges he faces and the third relates to the role of the House of Commons and its Select Committees in the appointments process.

Thanks to Sir Michael's evidence, we were satisfied unanimously as a Committee about his independence from Ministers and his commitment to the importance and integrity of statistics. We asked him tough questions, including one that I put to him at the beginning of the meeting about his close family connections with No. 10 Downing street—his son is the chief of staff to the Prime Minister. Sir Michael answered that question very clearly, saying that his son was a civil servant, and that he phoned him up after the appointment to congratulate him. He was very clear on that, and I have read since that Sir Michael prepared a report on independence for the Bank of England when he was personal assistant to the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, Lord Lawson, but it was not implemented by that Government. His son, Tom Scholar, however, was involved in the preparation of the report on independence for the Bank of England in 1997. The Governor of the Bank of England has referred to that as "a scholarly achievement" and I would endorse that comment.

Sir Michael answered that question very satisfactorily. We also tested his willingness to take a position at odds with Ministers and we were encouraged by his answers. I suggest that we brought the best out of Sir Michael, because he is a civil servant, and he mentioned that since his retirement six years ago, and during his time spent heading St. John's college, Oxford that—unlike a number of other civil servants—he has never spoken to the press. We suggested to him that perhaps everything he had said in the past six years had been off the record, but it was very important that everything he said as chair of the Statistics Board was on the record, and that he should question the Government on a number of points.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) and the Minister were both on the Treasury Select Committee, so if anyone thinks of it as a Select Committee that is in isolation from the House, they can forget it. I would suggest that on the evidence of today—from both the Front Benchers—the Treasury Committee is a good training ground for people who want to get on and get promotion. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the Minister on the distinction of their service on the Treasury Committee, and I wish both of them well for the future. I suggest that wishing both Front Benchers well shows a real independent stance by the Chairman of the Treasury Committee.

We were encouraged by Sir Michael's responses, and as a result, we recommend him to the House. I want to touch on the challenges that he will face. Public confidence in statistics in the United Kingdom is low. That may be because of the perception that statistics can be spun by Ministers, and a key challenge for Sir Michael will be to work to overcome this perception and to monitor the arrangements that give rise to it. When questioned by the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), Sir Michael was very clear that he wanted pre-release times to be shorter. Furthermore, he wished that that had been a decision for the board, and the Committee agreed with those comments. We look forward to him chairing the board in the professional manner he has shown in his life as a civil servant and as an academic, and we also hope that at times, he will make constructive criticism of the Government when we feel that they have got it wrong.

We know that the Government have given ground on pre-release times, such as the 24-hour notice period for national statistics, but that is still out of line with

[John McFall]

international comparisons and the United Nations recommendation. Indeed, the Select Committee visited the Republic of Ireland a few months ago, when we examined arrangements there for statistics and pre-release. The Act that governs that in the Republic of Ireland dates back to 1993, which shows how far behind we were. We have come far, but there is still a distance to go on pre-release statistics.

I remember an opinion poll that suggested that only 17 per cent. of the population in the United Kingdom had confidence in official statistics. That is bad for statistics, politicians and the democratic process. It is important to improve the position and I hope that Sir Michael's appointment will help.

Sir Michael will face an organisational challenge. It has already been said that, earlier this week, we published a report arising from an inquiry by the Sub-Committee, which is ably chaired by the hon. Member for Sevenoaks. It characterised the Office for National Statistics as an organisation under intense pressure. I trust that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary will tackle some of those pressures before 1 April 2008. In doing that, I hope that she will work closely with Sir Michael as shadow chair.

The combined task that Sir Michael faces will make demands on his time. He has been appointed as a non-executive chairman to work a three-day week. We questioned him about his other commitments, most notably his post as head of St. John's college, Oxford. He told us that he would work three days at St. John's college and three days at the Statistics Board. That is a six-day week and we forcefully suggested to him that his primary responsibility should be his Statistics Board job. He took that point on board. The position as chair of the Statistics Board must be his primary commitment.

Let me offer some thoughts on the new process. In the case that we are considering, a pre-appointment Select Committee hearing and a debate on the Floor of the House have taken place. However, the Government's report on the new constitutional arrangements does not make clear the posts that are up for pre-appointment hearing and those that are not. The Government have much work to do on that.

I welcome the Government's proposals that Select Committee hearings should precede formal appointments, but the case for motions and debates on non-controversial appointments is not clear. Taking the two points together, along with the Government's argument that Select Committees' views should be non-binding, the Committee proposes that debates and votes in the House should be reserved for cases in which Select Committees reach an adverse opinion on a Government nominee. We have not reached such an opinion about Sir Michael's appointment, which we welcome and support.

We are glad to support the motion and we wish Sir Michael and his colleagues every success on the Statistics Board in the next few years, with a view to improving confidence in statistics and thereby in the democratic process.

4.18 pm

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): Although I have not had the privilege of serving on the Treasury Select Committee, I am not here to break the consensus on endorsing Sir Michael Scholar and confirming him as Government nominee to the post of chair of the Statistics Board. The right hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (John McFall) was right to highlight Sir Michael's experience and to question him strongly about his work load and his independence. The Committee was right to do that forcefully, and its members have shown themselves to be independent in reaching their conclusions.

The process has been worth while and I would like to dwell on that. It is new and welcome. It is excellent to have the opportunity not only to hold a pre-appointment hearing but to debate and potentially vote on the nomination on the Floor of the House. My question to the Exchequer Secretary focuses on the role of the Select Committee and the interaction with the process until now, with the passage of the Statistics and Registration Service Bill through Parliament. We know now that departmental responsibility for the issue will fall not to the Treasury, but to the Cabinet Office. Although I appreciate that that was not the basis on which the Bill was planned and went through, and the appointment process started, that was known when the Treasury contacted the right hon. Gentleman and asked for a pre-appointment hearing for Sir Michael.

Given the compressed timetable and the fact that it was known then that it was more than likely that responsibility would be transferred to the Cabinet Office, I wonder whether it would have been appropriate to involve a Select Committee with the relevant experience and expertise in the Cabinet Office rather than in the Treasury. That would have reflected how things were going to be, rather than the process thus far. My question for the Exchequer Secretary is: did the Treasury consider such a move? Perhaps the Select Committee on Public Administration could have undertaken a role similar to that undertaken by the Treasury Committee.

I conclude by echoing the right hon. Gentleman's comments, in welcoming the opportunity that we have had and in asking the Exchequer Secretary how she and other Ministers will consider extending the process to other high-profile appointments. This case might be the only instance in which we have such an opportunity. We have heard concerns expressed about how compressed the process was, but there is cross-party support for the principle, so I very much hope that the Government will consider extending it to other posts of such importance and high profile.

4.21 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I, too, join the chorus of congratulation of the Government on initiating the process. It is the kind of thing for which I have argued for years and it is a pleasure to be part of a Parliament that is implementing it. I also congratulate the Treasury Committee on doing a pretty okay job at almost no notice. It came across clearly from the questions that the Committee asked Sir Michael Scholar, from his experience and his commitment to independence, and from the interview process as a whole, that the appointment was appropriate.

I want to focus on one aspect of the questioning that could have been fuller. I do not say that in a critical tone, because the Committee did a good job at short notice, as well as giving an exposition of how the process should go forward, which is also helpful. I want to focus on Sir Michael's post-appointment actions. There was a focus on the appointment of other board members, which was quite appropriate, but in my judgment we are making a mistake—hon. Members will have heard me say this before—about what the source of the lack of public confidence in statistics is.

It is true that one source of the lack of public confidence in statistics is a sense that politicians get hold of them first and might manipulate them. However, there is a much more important source, which is when those statistics are just plain wrong. We have to address that issue seriously—indeed, there is an Adjournment debate on the subject today. I am profoundly concerned that we are not confronting certain weaknesses sufficiently strongly. We all know that they are not deliberate weaknesses—the Office for National Statistics is not trying to get the census and inter-census estimates of population wrong—but we are also confronted with overwhelming evidence that things are not right.

One of the risks of that public discourse is that the Committee goes with the flow when people say, "Oh well, the source of the lack of public confidence in statistics is spin." I believe that there is another very important source of the lack of public confidence in statistics—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. This is a very narrow motion, and if the hon. Lady is going to engage in a discussion about one of the specific functions of the office in question, she must keep that point brief and relate it back to the specific matter of the appointment of the name on the Order Paper.

Fiona Mactaggart: Thank you very much for your kindness, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The point that I was about to make was that I was rather surprised that the Committee, in questioning Sir Michael, did not probe his plans for tackling failures in the quality of our statistics as powerfully as I would have expected. It probed very strongly his plans for the appointment of the panel, and for pre-release information, but I did not feel that it dealt with that first issue strongly enough.

I am raising this matter because one of the functions of this kind of process is to have a parliamentary debate about these appointments, and I am confident that the new chairman of the Statistics Board will read the Committee's very useful report and the report of this debate closely. It is right for Members to use this debate to set the board on track to improving our national statistics, because I am certain that an excellent chair of the Statistics Board would want that to happen.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Has the hon. Lady corresponded with Sir Michael and posed to him the questions that she thinks the Committee should have asked him, but did not? If so, did he reply? If not, might she consider doing so?

Fiona Mactaggart: As usual, the hon. Gentleman makes a helpful suggestion. I have not yet corresponded with Sir Michael. I felt that the first place to raise this issue was in this debate. I have made these points to the Exchequer Secretary before. I am sure that she is getting quite bored by them, but persistence does change things in politics.

Angela Eagle: I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that I never get bored listening to the extremely important points that she raises in debate.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my hon. Friend for that kind remark.

Following this debate, I will take the opportunity to write to Sir Michael to make the point about the way in which failures in the census process and the inter-census estimates are undermining public confidence in our statistics. I will also ask him how he plans to ensure that we rebuild that confidence by making those statistics more accurate.

4.27 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I shall not follow the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) too deeply into the issue of the census. She described our report as "pretty okay", so I shall simply congratulate her on a pretty okay speech. She might like to know, however, that the Treasury Select Committee will address the preparations for the new census, as it did for the previous census, at some point in the next year.

I want to speak briefly in support of the motion. I welcome the new procedure, which allows the House to express its view. Should the motion be passed, it will also enable the new chairman of the board to begin the task of rebuilding public confidence in statistics knowing that he has the full support of Members on both sides of the House. The Treasury Committee, which looked in detail at Sir Michael Scholar's appointment, supports him and has confidence in him. We questioned him at length, and then discussed his candidacy at length, before making the recommendation that is now before the House.

The fact that the new procedure has been introduced for this appointment underlines the importance of the chairmanship of the new, independent Statistics Board. It is an important post. I believe that the chairman of the Statistics Board should become a big public figure, who is able not only to lead one of the major public agencies but to give the public back their confidence in the statistics that it provides. That matters because the new board is now, finally, at the end of the legislation, independent of Ministers in all respects bar one. The chairman of the board will therefore be closer to Parliament than any of his predecessors.

That also matters because he takes over the chairmanship of the board at a time when the Office for National Statistics is in transition. It is becoming the Statistics Board; it is relocating to Newport; it is facing formidable challenges; and, as the hon. Member for Slough reminds us from time to time, it is preparing for the census in 2011. As the Treasury Committee mentioned in a separate report earlier this week, it also faces a series of challenges and is under enormous

[Mr. Michael Fallon]

pressure from the Government in terms of efficiency savings—costs and headcount reductions—which could put at risk services on which key users such as the Treasury itself, the banks, the City and business so desperately rely.

It was the permanent secretary who, in giving evidence to our Committee, defended the efficiency targets. When he was asked why he was piling them on top of the relocation, on top of the preparation for the census, on top of legislative preparations to transfer the ONS to the Statistics Board, he replied that the target-setting process was

"like trying to solve a set of simultaneous equations".

I have to say that this is not an academic exercise. We need a strong Office for National Statistics producing accurate and timely statistics, which are a vital public service and a cornerstone of our democracy. The new chairman therefore needs quickly to get a grip of the challenges faced by the ONS and ensure that management is fully supported and that priorities are properly set before the ONS is overwhelmed. He must ensure that it is ready for the challenges that lie ahead—not least the preparation for the 2011 census.

My final point is to ask whether Sir Michael Scholar is the right man. He is a former Treasury mandarin and I note that former Treasury mandarins never quite retire—not when new quangos are being set up! I am not convinced, however, that when it comes to applying for those particular jobs, Treasury mandarins should necessarily be discriminated against just because they are Treasury mandarins. In any event, there is not much evidence that they are being discriminated against. Given their success in securing the glittering prizes, I would make one suggestion. It might be an idea for the current permanent secretary not necessarily to sit on each of these selection panels, when he is so likely to appear on the other side of the table in future.

Two main considerations apply to Sir Michael's candidacy, the first of which is independence. Will he be sufficiently independent? The Treasury Committee was fully satisfied on that point. It is already clear, one day after the Government asked the House to send an amendment back to the Lords, that Sir Michael Scholar disagrees with the Government. He believes that pre-release should be a matter for the board and not for Ministers to determine. Within 48 hours of the Prime Minister's recommendation that the maximum time for pre-release should be 24 hours, he also disagreed with that. He said that he would much prefer less time. The all-party Treasury Committee, which includes six former Ministers, recommended only three hours. I hope that Sir Michael follows that independence through and makes vigorous comments on the arrangements for pre-release access when the Government publish them in draft. When it comes to the 12-month review of those arrangements, I hope that the Statistics Board under his chairmanship will make it very clear what it would prefer.

The only remaining issue was the time commitment involved in the job. As the Chairman of our Committee has already said, the post is three days a week. Sir Michael is already committed as president of a busy Oxford college and he has a non-executive directorship, all of which seem to add up to six days a week. I simply draw the House's attention to our recommendation that the chairmanship must be his primary commitment. He must be here in London or out in Newport at the office rather than in the garden or at the organ or in the cellars of St. John's college, Oxford. Indeed, we expect him not only to fulfil his commitment at the London and Newport offices but to be here as well, answering questions in Parliament. He should make himself fully accountable for the work of the Statistics Board to whatever new Committee takes on the scrutiny function that my Sub-Committee has exercised for so long.

John Bercow: My hon. Friend offers his usual dispassionate assessment of the state of things. Would he understand if I suggested that many right hon. and hon. Members might think that anyone who had to prepare to appear before a Committee of which my hon. Friend was a member could consider that a full-time job in itself?

Mr. Fallon: What is important is that from now on that person makes himself fully accountable to Parliament and appears before whatever new Committee takes on the function that my Sub-Committee has exercised for so long.

I hope that the House will support the motion, and in so doing wish Sir Michael Scholar well.

4.35 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport, West) (Lab): The motion proves that if a Member is in the House long enough, all decisions are ultimately reversed. I recall vividly in 1988 when Margaret Thatcher transferred the then Central Statistical Office, which was under the control of the Cabinet Office, to the Treasury, to the great chagrin of many of the statisticians in my constituency who were concerned that it had gone to the Department with the greatest vested interest in fiddling the figures. They were worried about their positions and that the value of their work would be undermined by ministerial interference. I was told in a letter from Margaret Thatcher that that was an unworthy thought. Unworthy though it may have been, we are now moving the organisation back. There is great merit in that.

I welcome the procedure. It is innovative and has been called for by many people with an interest in our parliamentary processes. It is a major reform. As Andrew Dilnot said, the Statistics and Registration Service Bill might be the most important Bill in this Parliament—at least equivalent to the legislation that gave independence to the Bank of England.

We welcome the appointment of Sir Michael. He seems eminently qualified. He is of robust independence. As we heard, he is not entirely in tune with Government thinking on the release of information. We made the point many times that the Government have been very reasonable and generous in taking on almost every amendment produced in this House and elsewhere to improve the Bill to ensure that the service has independence and authority.

I have just one small point to raise. Although I was happy to vote with the Government the other day, there is a lingering doubt, and that is a shame. The Minister is visiting the ONS in my constituency tomorrow, which is a matter of joy both to her and to my constituents. I hope that she will take on the

unfortunate attempt to reduce the enthusiasm for the move to the Newport. Some people do not seem to accept with the enthusiasm that they should the Government's offer to give them a passport out of Pimlico to the joys of Newport and its hinterland. I hope that tomorrow she will see the many people who came from the south-east of England—from the Patent Office, the Prison Service, the UK Passport Service and the ONS—with grave doubts about whether they would settle well in Newport and who have found themselves much happier in so many ways with the facilities and the quality of life there. They will be very happy to hear about the appointment, and that the innovation has been used for the first time for the ONS in its new headquarters in the city of Newport.

4.38 pm

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): I approve of the nomination of Sir Michael Scholar. I disapprove of combining the commission and the statistics organisation, but that has been decided. I approved of the Government setting up the Statistics Commission, which was a better way of doing things. I thought that combining the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys and the Central Statistical Office was probably a mistake 11 years ago or so.

What Sir Michael says should be agreed by all—good statistics are like sound money or clean water. He describes them as an absolute necessity. I hope that the Government will use his advice to decide which statisticians sign the statisticians code and which do not. There has been some lack of clarity on that. All statisticians should sign up to the code, whether they are employed centrally or are departmental statisticians. I should declare that had I worked harder at university I would probably have joined the civil service like my brother, my father and our grandfather, and that I might therefore have been approaching this matter from the other end.

One remaining doubt raised about Sir Michael Scholar is whether he can be president of St. John's, Cambridge and—*[Interruption.]* I meant to say Oxford.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. There is a considerable difference between those two institutions.

Peter Bottomley: The president of St. John's, Oxford, should be able to combine that role with having responsibility for statistics, as Lord Rees off Ludlow is able to combine the roles of master of Trinity College, Cambridge and president of the Royal Society—and I do not regard even the statistics job to be more important than that.

4.40 pm

Angela Eagle: I am glad that there has been a widespread cross-party welcome for Sir Michael's appointment and this innovative process; it is the first of its kind, but I am sure that there will be many others.

The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) has taken his life in his hands by mixing up St. John's, Cambridge, with St. John's, Oxford. As the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) pointed out, St. John's, Oxford, has a large cellar. As an ex-member of that college, I heard about the cellar but I never gained access to it while I was there. I hope that Sir Michael has not discovered the keys and that he can concentrate on what is widely recognised as an important job, which he is eminently qualified to do.

We are entering a new era. The Office for National Statistics is preparing for independence, and that has been widely welcomed in all parts of the House. The Statistics and Registration Service Bill might well be one of the most important Bills for many years. I am sure that the system for pre-release and other issues will evolve; the Bill has been created and subsequently changed in ways that will assist that to happen. I can certainly give the House an undertaking that I, as Exchequer Secretary, will work closely with Sir Michael and the shadow board when it comes into existence in the run-up to April next year when the ONS will celebrate its independence.

Until that happens—or until the responsibility for the ONS transfers to the Cabinet Office, if that happens earlier—it is entirely appropriate for the Treasury Committee to undertake the pre-appointment hearings. It is currently the best qualified Committee to do so because it has taken a close interest in statistics over the past 10 years, although—as the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) hinted—other Committees of this House might in future be in a better position to perform such tasks. I congratulate it on the robust job it has done. It has produced recommendations of support in quick time, as a result of the innovative nature of the procedure used and the closeness of the recess. Given the constraints that we have had to deal with, a good job has been done all round.

John McFall: Mention has been made of the Treasury permanent secretary being on the appointments panel. I received a letter from the Chancellor that suggested that, as well as the permanent secretary, Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, Deirdre Hutton, chair of the Food Standards Agency, and Olivia Grant, independent assessor of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, were on the panel. Although such appointments do not fall within the remit of the public appointments commission, the Committee was pleased with the appointments process.

May I also say through the Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Paul Flynn) that we are aware of the issue of the transfer of statisticians to Newport? We wish the process to remain smooth, so that when my hon. Friend goes out at night to buy his Indian carry-out, he will bump into statistician after statistician in the queue.

Angela Eagle: A rare time is obviously going to be had by all in Newport. I look forward to my visit there to see how things are going. The Government will respond in much more detail to the Treasury Select Committee's report on the current situation at the ONS and the pressures it is under. For the record, I want to reassure the House that its senior management have a strong record on managing relocation, and they are meeting all their output commitments, which is a tremendous result in times of change.

I thank the House for its widespread support for the suggestion that Sir Michael be appointed, and I commend that decision to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House endorses the nomination of Sir Michael Scholar KCB for appointment as Chair of the Statistics Board.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In connection with the motion that the Leader of the House is about to move, may I ask why it is on the Order Paper in the form that it is? If the nomination of the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) had been placed on the Order Paper on Monday, there would have been no need to suspend Standing Order No. 121. I have to confess that, as someone who has chaired the Procedure Committee for some eight years, I find this an abuse of the House of Commons. This motion has appeared only today and should in my view have appeared 48 hours earlier. The press might well have been interested in this matter for a variety of reasons, which might well be raised during the course of the debate on this motion. To suspend Standing Orders for the nomination of a Member to, and the discharge of a Member from, a Select Committee is an abuse of this House and has not allowed it sufficient time to consider the relevance of the motion, and the suitability of the individual in fulfilling what I consider to be a very important role in this House of Commons.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I echo the comments of my hon. Friend, but also say that the point is that the Committee of Selection has been unable to meet to consider this name and to put it before the House? I understand that that is most unusual. It is not, presumably, as if the Government did not know that they wanted to put this motion before the House in sufficient time for the Committee to be called to meet to consider the name.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was going to leave this point to the substantive debate, but we on the Liberal Democrat Benches—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I will take the hon. Gentleman's point of order in a second, but I should say that there is little point in having two debates on this matter, which seems to be what we are about to do.

Simon Hughes: I was going to associate myself and my colleagues with the concerns expressed about the process, and to ask for your ruling or indication, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as to whether—given that the process is neither necessary, nor has been carried out properly—it is appropriate for us to proceed to the substantive debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The motion would not be on the Order Paper if it was not in order. I am sure that the Leader of the House will explain the reasons for its being there when she addresses the House. Having heard the Leader of the House, the House must then decide what to do.

Home Affairs

4.48 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): I beg to move,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 121 (Nomination of select committees), Mr John Denham be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Keith Vaz be added.

I am moving this motion because without it there will be a gap between now and October in the ability of the Home Affairs Select Committee to carry out its important work. It is important that the House maintain a fully effective system of scrutiny of Government by the departmental Select Committees.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The right hon. and learned Lady said that it is essential that the Home Affairs Committee carry out its work. What is preventing it from doing so? It does not require one extra member to continue its important and vital work. She must give us some reason to justify the point that she makes.

Ms Harman: I hope to give the reason in what will be a short speech.

As I was saying, it is important that the House maintain a fully effective system of scrutiny of Government by the departmental Select Committees, and we would not want any unnecessary break in that activity. The position at the moment in relation to the Home Affairs Committee is this. Following the appointment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) as Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Committee effectively has no chair. I say "effectively" because until my right hon. Friend is removed from the Committee, technically he remains a member, but it would be inappropriate for him to participate in the Committee's proceedings—as I am sure hon. Members would agree. This motion would remove him from the Committee and fill the resulting vacancy.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I entirely understand the thrust of the argument that the Leader of the House is developing, but if memory serves me correctly, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills was appointed on 28 June. There have been no fewer than 27 days since that appointment, during the course of which it would presumably have been possible to establish the willingness or otherwise of the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) to serve as the replacement Chair. Why now?

Ms Harman: Perhaps I can respond by setting out the chronology. On 27 June the Prime Minister became Prime Minister, and thereafter he had to select and appoint his Cabinet. After that, he had to move on and appoint junior Ministers. After that, he had to identify and appoint Under-Secretaries. Hon. Members will understand that one could not work out who was in the pool of Members available to serve on a Select Committee before all those appointments were made. It sometimes seems that it takes a long time for a Cabinet to be selected—

Mr. Douglas-Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): At the very least, would the right hon. and learned Lady agree that we knew the pool last week? The name could have been put down without requiring the dispensation of the order. Why was the motion not tabled in good time so that the order did not have to be disapplied?

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The Leader of the House must be allowed to respond to one intervention before she takes another.

Ms Harman: I agree with the thrust of interventions from hon. Members that it would have been much better if we had had sufficient time for the Selection Committee to be convened and the nomination put to the House with the usual notice. That would have been the best way to do it, but we faced a choice. Either we had to go through this rather truncated procedure—I acknowledge that that is what it is—or we would have had no Select Committee operating between now and October.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for being generous in giving way. She is making several presumptions about decisions that are rightly decisions for the Committee rather than for the House. Would it not be in order for the Committee on Home Affairs to meet and choose to elect another from among its membership to be Chairman or acting Chairman, until the vacancy created by the promotion of the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills is filled? The Committee could have continued to operate without this motion.

Ms Harman: Yes, it is possible that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, who had previously been the Chairman and remains a member of the Committee, could simply have not participated in an election of one of the existing members as an acting Chairman until October. However, my view is that it is better to offer the House another name and give the Committee an opportunity to elect a new Chairman, and set about its programme of work without having to return in October to go through the process of selection again.

I agree that there are downsides to all the different ways of doing things, but we are in this position because it inevitably takes some time to choose a Cabinet, junior Ministers and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries. That cannot be done before it is known who makes up the pool, and that is why it has taken until now to make this decision.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): My recollection is that all the Ministers were appointed quickly, but I have been told that the Home Affairs Committee met yesterday and appointed the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) as its temporary Chairman. The Committee is therefore fully competent to continue, albeit with one member who does not participate or vote. Can it not do all its business in that way until we come back after the summer?

Ms Harman: If we had put forward that proposition, other hon. Members might have asked why the Committee had an acting Chair who was unable to get on with the long-term work programme. Since we are simply proposing that one member of the Committee be replaced by another, and given that we have decided who we want that replacement to be, hon. Members would have wondered why we did not just go ahead and make the change. That is what we have done.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): The Leader of the House may know that the Committee of Selection was provisionally scheduled to meet on Monday, but we were told that there was no Government business to conduct, so the meeting was cancelled. What happened between Monday evening and this morning, when this motion appeared on the Order Paper?

Ms Harman: I should like to thank the right hon. Gentleman, who is Chair of the Committee of Selection, and the other hon. Members who were prepared to make themselves available at very short notice. However, the process of choosing the name to put forward to the House obviously had to be gone through, and it was still under way this week. I agree that the procedure is truncated, but I emphasise that we are talking about a Member of this House who has been put in the Cabinet, which means that the Select Committee needs another member. We have come forward with a name, which we are putting to the House.

Sir George Young: We?

Ms Harman: I have put the name forward.

John Bercow: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Sir George Young: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Mr. Hogg: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Mr. Shepherd: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Ms Harman: I will.

Mr. Shepherd: I am very grateful—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. When the Leader of the House gives way, may I ask her to say to whom? On this occasion, I think that it is to Mr. Richard Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To the casual viewer, the motion looks like the Government choosing who shall be Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. The detail of the motion supports that idea. The Committee could be operating now under an acting Chairman—who would make a very fine Chairman of the Committee—and we could be getting on with business. This looks like Executive control over the choices of the Chamber, and bypassing the very function of the Committee of Selection. It is outrageous!

Ms Harman: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman thinks that the motion is outrageous and an abuse, but we are simply trying to assist the House by ensuring that the Home Affairs Committee has its full complement of members. It will be for the Committee itself to decide who to elect as its Chair, and determine its work programme.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): The Leader of the House has heard the views expressed in this Chamber, and is now able to reconsider her arguments. May I invite her to consider withdrawing the motion and not putting it forward for decision today? In addition, has the acting Chairman been getting the additional salary due to the post over the past month? Would not it be better to let the acting Chairman take that money over the summer so that the Committee can get on with its work? We could then come back to the matter in October.

Ms Harman: I will have to find out whether the acting Chairman is drawing his additional salary.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (Lab): I do not want to intervene in the present controversy, save to make it clear that I have not been paid, and that I would not accept any additional salary for being the acting Chair for the past few weeks. There would be no justification for such payment.

Ms Harman: I ask the House—

Mr. Hogg: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Ms Harman: I will, although it is for the second time.

Mr. Hogg: Will the right hon. and learned Lady please reply to the question put by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young)? Why was the Committee of Selection meeting fixed for Monday cancelled, when it could have considered this very question?

Ms Harman: As I said, I was not in a position to put forward the name to the Committee of Selection, and I accept that it would have been better had it been able to go to the Committee. We need to understand the rules of the House and I understand that we have had to go round the Standing Orders, but we should step back, look at the picture as a whole and recognise what we are trying to achieve. A member of the Select Committee has taken up ministerial office and is in the Cabinet, so although still on the Committee, he cannot participate in it. The Committee, therefore, has one member—

Sir George Young: Can the right hon. and learned Lady give the House any precedent for what she is doing this afternoon?

Ms Harman: I shall have to get back to the right hon. Gentleman on that, but the issue arises from the timing. We are approaching the summer recess, and as Leader of the House I know that it is important that we have fully functioning Select Committees and that the House should have an opportunity to choose from among its Members those to be appointed to the Select Committee. I also know that the Standing Orders of the House are important, which is why the House has an opportunity to decide on the matter today.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Lady please inform the House what specific plans the Home Affairs Committee has to meet between now and 8 October? What specific work does it plan to do? Is she aware that some Members take the view that the matter is being rushed—with the meeting tomorrow to seek to elect the new Chairman—so that for two months during the recess he can receive a salary that would not have been provided had this unusual motion bypassing the Committee of Selection not been tabled today?

Ms Harman: The motion will enable us to replace a member of the Select Committee who has become a member of the Cabinet. Members can try to read into it all sorts of nefarious motives, but it is quite simple. We are short of time, because of when the change of Prime Minister happened. It takes a while to work out the pool for all the Under-Secretary appointments, so we have come straight to the House without going via the Committee of Selection, which would have been a more desirable procedure. It is right to give the Home Affairs Committee an opportunity to meet with its new complement of members if possible, so that it can establish a work programme before 8 October when the House returns.

Simon Hughes: The Leader of the House is not to blame for the past history of this matter, and I am conscious that she is in difficulty. Will she seriously reflect on the idea proposed by the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley), which is, I think, widely shared? It is necessary to have an extra member now so that the Committee can do its work, and we understand the problem, but to have an unprecedented change in the Standing Orders, in controversial circumstances, which looks like an attempt to bounce the House into a decision, is not a helpful start for the right hon. and learned Lady or for the House. It would be much wiser just to say, "Okay, we understand," and come back to the matter in October.

Ms Harman: It is difficult to take the view of the House by listening solely to interventions. Normally, the House expresses its view on a motion and then has the opportunity to vote. Perhaps I could press on with the points I want to make, although without a huge amount of confidence that I will sway Members with my speech.

With the best will in the world, I think that I understand exactly what hon. Members are saying. I understand their concerns. It is not an ideal situation, but it is better for the Home Affairs Committee to have its full complement of members. It does not have the right complement of members at the moment, because one of its members is a member of the Cabinet, and we need to change that and replace the member of the Cabinet with someone who is not a Cabinet Minister, a Minister of State or an Under-Secretary.

Mr. Burns: Will the right hon. and learned Lady now answer my original question? When will the Home Affairs Committee meet between this Friday and

Monday 8 October? What work does it propose to do during that time? Is she aware that the motion for the meeting tomorrow is solely to elect a Chairman?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman will know that it is not the case that no work is undertaken through the Select Committee system throughout the summer. A work programme is taken forward, and I simply say that the Select Committee system is still important when the House is not sitting.

Mr. Hogg: When will the Committee meet?

Ms Harman: The Home Affairs Committee's meetings are a matter for the Committee. It is not a matter for me, as the Leader of the House, to dictate when the Committee sits, but it would have time, if the House sees fit, to meet to approve the motion that I have tabled and, if it so decides, to choose a new Chairman and to establish, through that Chairman, a work programme that would take it through until October. I understand hon. Members' concern and outrage, but people would also be concerned if we went into the summer recess with a Cabinet Minister still a member of the Home Affairs Committee.

John Bercow *rose—*

Ms Harman: I will give way once more, and then I must press on with my speech, which I hope will sway the House—although I think that unlikely.

John Bercow: The right hon. and learned Lady interpreted the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) about payment as relating to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick).

Ms Harman: No, I did not.

John Bercow: If the right hon. and learned Lady did not, I am grateful. The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills is not only a very capable man, but a person of the utmost integrity. So, for the avoidance of doubt, will she confirm that even though he has been in the curious twilight zone of serving both as a member of the Cabinet and as a member of a Committee that scrutinises the Executive, he has not taken a salary as Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee over the past month? I feel sure that he will not have done.

Ms Harman: I understood that to be the question to me, and I undertook to answer it in writing. We had a helpful additional bit of information from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), but I did not think that I was asked about that. I understood the question as the hon. Gentleman did, and I will ask what the position is.

When the Committee has a new Chairman in place, it can agree a work programme for the period during and after the summer recess. It clearly makes sense for the Committee to choose a Chairman and to go on to consider its programme, with the correct membership and not with a Minister being technically a member of the Committee. Without the change in membership necessitated by my right hon. Friend's joining the Cabinet, the Committee will not have its correct membership as it heads into the summer recess. The motion provides only for my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) to become a member of the Committee. It is for the Committee then to choose its Chairman.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): Has the right hon. and learned Lady read the Standards and Privileges Committee's fifth report of 2001-02? If she has not, I should like to refer her particularly to paragraph 51 onwards—I will not read it all, Mr. Deputy Speaker—which is headed, "Wrongful interference with the investigation process". The report states:

"We conclude that Mr. Vaz recklessly made a damaging allegation against"

a former police officer, and it then recommended that the right hon. Gentleman

"be suspended from the service of the House".

The report is perfectly clear. Has she read it?

Ms Harman: I am aware of that report. I am also aware of the important work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East as a member of the Constitutional Affairs Committee. The motion is before the House. I accept that it would have been better if the nomination had come through the Committee of Selection in the usual way, but, even if Members do not agree with my decision to proceed in this way, I ask them at least to accept that it is a result of the timing, and not—*[Interruption.]* I am telling the House that we are doing this not because we want to bounce the House into something at the last minute—*[Interruption.]* I ask hon. Members to accept what I am saying. They might think that the choice that I have made to put the motion before the House today is wrong, but I ask them to accept my good faith: it was timing that dictated the decision, not some idea that we were going to slip this through on the last but one day of business.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am not sure that this is entirely a matter of timing. I suggest to the right hon. and learned Lady that if another nomination had been made, it might well have gone through without any difficulty. A matter has been raised that causes many of us deep concern, and I have to raise it with her. The right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) is not just being appointed as a member of the Home Affairs Committee; he is being put forward as a member of the Committee in order to assume the Chair. That is what is really of concern to Members.

Ms Harman: It sounds to me as if the hon. Gentleman is saying that if I proposed a different name to the House, the House would feel less concerned about the process, and that what is really being objected to is the name. Having apologised for the process, I ask the House to consider the name.

John Bercow: The Leader of the House will not be surprised to know that today, as quite often, I find myself in the position of being rather a contrary nuisance, but I do not apologise for that. The process is

[John Bercow]

unfortunate and it has not been ideally handled, but I have no personal objection whatever to the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), who is a serious and committed parliamentarian. What happened in the past is what happened in the past. The right hon. Gentleman is a serious and assiduous parliamentarian—rather more assiduous and serious than a great many others—so he should not be derided or have his integrity impugned in his absence. It is not right and it should not happen.

Ms Harman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment. I will conclude my remarks by saying that I accept that the process has been short-circuited. That is not the way I would have liked to proceed. However, that is entirely a result of the timing. It is in no way connected with the question of the name. There are two separate things: one is the process and the other is the name. In order to remove the member who has been promoted to the Cabinet, and put my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East on the Committee, I hope that the House will support the motion.

5.13 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I have to say to the right hon. and learned Lady that her defence of the process that the Government have used this afternoon has been woefully inadequate. That defence has come from a representative of a Government whose leader stood at the Dispatch Box and said that, as Prime Minister, he was ushering in a new era of respect for the House. Far from respecting Parliament, today the Government are showing complete disdain and disrespect for the House and its Members. I wish to confine my remarks to the issue of process, about which I am very concerned. The right hon. and learned Lady is the defender not only of Back Benchers in the House, but of processes in the House.

It has been four clear weeks since the Prime Minister took office. I have not been able to check the dates, and I apologise for that, but my recollection is that most of the ministerial positions were decided on between 10 days and two weeks after he took office. That left two weeks clear in which the right hon. and learned Lady could have followed the proper process for putting forward a new name for the Home Affairs Committee. If the Government had wished to do things in the right way—if they were willing to have an open, proper debate, and had not wanted to try to push through the measure at the last minute—they could have done so.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) for pointing out that the Committee of Selection was stood down. Either the name was suddenly brought forward at the very last moment—that is, in the past 24 to 36 hours—or the name was known, in which case the Selection Committee need not have been stood down, and the name could have been put before it.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) (Con): A large part of the burden of the Leader of the House's argument is that it is essential that the Home Affairs Committee should have its full complement of members, but have not at least two other Select Committees—the Select Committees on International Development and on Environmental Audit—also lost members who have been appointed to the Government? They have not been replaced, as far as I am aware. Does that not make the Leader of the House's argument somewhat inconsistent?

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing that out, and he is right: his point further punctures the bubble of the Leader of the House's argument. In any case, the idea that there had to be such a motion in order for the change to be made, and that we could not abide by the Standing Orders today, is based on the fallacy that the Home Affairs Committee would be completely incapable of continuing to do its job unless it had the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) as a member. As has been pointed out, the Committee has in fact met recently, and of its own free will and volition it chose the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) to be acting Chairman.

Mr. Burns: Does my right hon. Friend accept that part of the Leader of the House's argument is that it is important that the decision be taken today because the previous Chairman is now a Cabinet member? Her argument is that that is not right, and he should be removed. If that is the case, why have the Government not brought forward two other motions to remove the other two Ministers who are still members of Select Committees? Surely those Committees will not be able to do their work during the summer, and surely those members should be removed, too.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making an extremely pertinent point that goes to the very heart of the argument made by the Leader of the House. Either no Select Committee that has a member who is in the Government and needs to be replaced can continue to do its work over the summer recess, or not. The Leader of the House cannot say that the Home Affairs Committee is somehow different from those other Committees. *[Interruption.]* Oh, from a sedentary position, she says that it is; I am happy to let her intervene on me and explain why alternative members for the other two Committees are not being proposed to the House today.

Ms Harman: That is because my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) was the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Mrs. May: Forgive me, but I think that a perusal of *Hansard* tomorrow will show that the Leader of the House referred not only to the issue of the chairmanship, but to the fact that a Select Committee needed the correct number of members if it was to do its work. In any case, her argument that it mattered that the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) was the Chairman of the Committee does not hold water either, because as I was explaining before I was intervened on by my hon. Friends, the Select Committee has met and appointed an acting Chairman. It has shown itself entirely capable of conducting its business without the intervention of a motion adding a person to the Select Committee.

None of us disputes that it is right that the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen should come off the Select Committee now that he is a member of the Government, or that a name will be put forward to replace him. What we object to is the fact that the Government have chosen to do that in rather a backhanded way. They are trying to force the measure through. They could properly have put a motion before the House, having gone through the Committee of Selection, or they could have come before the House and said, "Given the time scale, the Select Committee will run with an acting Chairman, the hon. Member for Walsall, North, as it has agreed; come the autumn, a motion will be put forward in the normal way." If the Leader of the House really understands her responsibilities to the House and if she genuinely respects the House, she will withdraw the motion immediately.

5.20 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): What started as a squall is becoming a storm. It is important for the Leader of the House to realise that this could be a serious matter if it goes wrong, and it would reflect badly on the House. It is important that we pause, that the right hon. and learned Lady reflects, and that in the end she accepts the growing, strongly expressed view that the motion should be withdrawn before we vote on it.

There are Standing Orders that govern us, which have been agreed by the House. The Standing Orders governing Select Committees include No. 121(2), which states:

"No motion shall be made for the nomination of members of select committees appointed under the standing orders of this House (with the exception of the Liaison Committee, the Committee of Selection, the Committee on Standards and Privileges and any Committee established under a temporary standing order), or for their discharge, unless"—

there are two conditions—

"*(a)* notice of the motion has been given at least two sitting days previously, and

(b) the motion is made on behalf of the Committee of Selection by the chairman or another member of the committee."

The Leader of the House is seeking our agreement to dispense with two of the rules we normally impose on ourselves. The first is that there are at least two days' notice—for very good reason, so that any Member with an interest in the matter can be present, can speak if they want to and can vote if they want to. That is not possible if the motion appears on the day of the vote. There are some colleagues who, for perfectly good family reasons, will not be here today because they may have started their holiday with their children, or whatever.

The second rule is that the motion be brought by somebody who acts independently on behalf of the Committee of Selection—the Chairman or another member on behalf of the Committee of Selection. That is not happening. The motion does not come from the body that meets every week, or more often if necessary, to choose members for all Committees. It is coming from the Leader of the House. With respect to her, I have not heard a single argument that justifies either of those breaches of the rules.

Let me explain to the right hon. and learned Lady why the arguments that she has made do not wash and do not work. The Prime Minister, having had 10 years to prepare, was well equipped to make early announcements of his Cabinet and his Ministers. Every Minister—Cabinet Minister, Minister of State and Under-Secretary of State—was appointed by the end of the first full week of his term of office. That took us to the end of the first week of July. No other appointments have been made since then, except in the other place, where there were a couple of slightly belated take-ups of appointments of the more controversial nominees.

Those who were appointed to the Cabinet immediately stopped functioning in their Select Committees. All who were appointed gave up that function. The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), gave up serving on the Home Affairs Committee then. The Home Affairs Committee has not stopped work, however, since the change of Prime Minister or Government. It has continued to sit, to meet, to take evidence and to interrogate people. Indeed, the new Home Secretary appeared before it yesterday.

The Committee has 13 serving members, who are described in the report published on 10 July. They are the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon), my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Mr. Browne), the hon. Members for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer), for Burton (Mrs. Dean), for Newark (Patrick Mercer), for Luton, South (Margaret Moran), and for Dover (Gwyn Prosser), my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), and the hon. Members for Reading, West (Martin Salter), for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) and for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). The report then says:

"The following members were also members of the committee during the inquiry:

Mr. John Denham MP (Labour, Southampton, Itchen) (former Chairman)

Mr. Richard Spring MP (Conservative, West Suffolk)".

The implication is that the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen gave up being Chairman, as we had widely and generally understood, and as would usually have been expected. The implication is also that he has given up serving on the Committee. He may not have been formally discharged, but he has certainly ceased to serve.

The Committee, however, has carried on its work. The hon. Member for Walsall, North, who has long had a reputation for an interest in home affairs matters, has been elected as its acting Chairman. Twelve other colleagues, of whom seven are Labour colleagues from the party that, as agreed through the usual channels, produces the Chairman, would be available and able to serve were the hon. Member for Walsall, North unable to do so. They, too, have long had reputations for interest in and commitment to the subject. There are four Conservative colleagues with such an interest and long service and two of my colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), who is a long-serving member of the Committee. There is no reason in the world why it has to have another member in order to do any work between now and

[Simon Hughes]

October. At the moment, it has not even fixed a programme of meetings for the recess. It has one meeting fixed, for tomorrow, to elect a Chairman, but no others.

We are being asked to nominate somebody in place of somebody who has left for a meeting to elect a Chairman and nothing else. That is complete nonsense. It is an abuse of the system and of the processes of the House, and it would be so even were the nomination not controversial—which it is, as it happens. People can take different views about the merits of the nomination of the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz). That makes it important for the House to have an opportunity to reflect on the matter. I have had representations to the effect that it is an inappropriate choice, although that is not a view that I had formed personally. I was asked to ask the Leader of the House whether it was being done so that the right hon. Gentleman could be the new Chairman. Is that the Government's plan? [HON. MEMBERS: "It is."] Implicitly, that is what was said, and my understanding is that that is precisely the plan. The Leader of the House said that Select Committee business is not for her, but she needs to be honest with us as to whether the Government's plan—not hers—is that the new nominee should be the Chairman.

In any case, we have plenty of opportunity to debate whether the right hon. Gentleman should be a member on the first day back in October, or any other day. I hope that the Leader of the House realises that it would seriously undermine the authority, competence and service of colleagues on the Committee were she to tell the House to say that the hon. Member for Walsall, North and the other hon. Ladies and Gentlemen from various parties were not competent to carry on the business of the Home Affairs Committee between now and October. That is not an acceptable proposition. They have served on the Committee, they have produced very good reports, and they were well served as Chairman by the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen, who gave it a very good reputation and profile and whom I commend and thank for his service. He is widely admired and respected. However, it is nonsense to argue that nobody else in the list of current members, including the hon. Member for Walsall, North, is competent or capable to carry out its business, whatever it may be—at the moment, there is none—over the next two and half months.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Can my hon. Friend conceive of any business that the Committee might wish to conduct between now and October that would be more serious than the first opportunity to hear from the new Home Secretary, as it did yesterday, and to quiz her on the work of the Home Office over the next year? That is clearly a serious bit of business, not a trivial matter, yet it was perfectly competently handled by the Committee as it stands.

Simon Hughes: My hon. Friend makes that point well and strongly. The Committee is served by very good officers, who are well established in their posts. It clearly decided that it did not need to wait for a change of personnel to get on with its work after the change of Government. It clearly decided that it wanted to address the major issues on its agenda, and it did so. It has not been prevented from doing so, and I am sure that it can do so during the first week back or the recess. It has the power to decide to meet in the recess, and to call people in front of it at that time. It is perfectly competent as a Select Committee, and it is able to continue.

I hope that the Leader of the House understands that if she is to go on as she started—she has done extremely well in all her appearances so far—she has to win the confidence of the House by seeking to reflect its will. To depart from that style and decide to impose by a whipped vote a change from Standing Orders in two major respects, on the last but one day of the summer term, in order to force through a controversial change of personnel in one of the most important Select Committees, will do great discredit to the prospective, positive reforming work that she and her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have begun.

I would like to make two last points. The Select Committee has been put in a very difficult position, as has the hon. Member for Walsall, North. I am sorry that he is in that position; it is not his fault at all. I am sure that if people had thought about the matter and been asked about it, they would have realised that there was another way forward, which was to delay matters.

Lastly, there has been no answer to this question. If the Government say that it is a matter of timing, why did they not manage the process in such a way that the Committee of Selection could have met to conduct its business last week? It could have met last week, Monday, yesterday, or this morning. It did not meet at any of those times. It was standing by, ready to meet, and willing and able to assist.

The Government have made a mess of this. It is their mistake, their maladministration and their incompetence. On behalf of all of us—party Members and independent colleagues—I say that we cannot let the House be steamrollered by a completely inappropriate motion on the last but one day of term. I hope that the right hon. and learned Lady realises that it will be in everyone's interests if she accepts that the motion can be withdrawn. Let the Home Affairs Committee do its work, and we can come back to the matter after the summer break, when we are all fresh and, if I may say so, not driven to be so bad tempered.

5.32 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) made a powerful speech, to which I want to add a relatively brief footnote. What the Leader of the House is doing is unprecedented and unnecessary. The Committee of Selection was established at the beginning of this Parliament and its job is to meet every week, to nominate people to Public Bill Committees, Select Committees, Committees on statutory instruments and Committees on private Bills. At the beginning of the Parliament, we nominated members of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and a motion was approved by the House. Since then, we have met weekly under the impartial and efficient chairmanship of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch, East (Rosemary McKenna).

Of course, there are occasions when we have to make changes to Select Committees. People get promoted, become Ministers or their preferences may change. When that happens, we meet on a Wednesday, and the changes are proposed in the name of the hon. Lady. They appear on the Order Paper, the House has an opportunity to reflect on them, and if it wishes, to object. We have met every Wednesday since the last reshuffle. As has been said during the debate, we were provisionally scheduled to meet this Monday, when we could have approved any changes to Select Committees. The names would then have appeared in the hon. Lady's name on the Order Paper today, in the normal way, and we would not have this problem. We were informed on Monday that the Government had no business, and the meeting was cancelled. We could have met today; we normally meet at 4.45 pm on a Wednesday, but there was no business scheduled for the Committee of Selection today, so we did not meet.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey correctly read out the Standing Order which protects the House. A motion has to have at least two sitting days' notice and it has to be made on behalf of the Committee of Selection by the Chairman, or another member of the Committee. Suspending Standing Orders requires a much better reason than anything that we have heard so far in the debate. The Home Affairs Committee has been meeting under the chairmanship of a senior and experienced Member. I doubt whether it planned to do much during the summer recess. If it had planned any work, it could have continued to meet under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick).

Why does it matter? It matters because it is up to the House of Commons, not the Executive, to nominate Members to serve on Select Committees. The Prime Minister has spoken of his wish to empower the House of Commons and enable us better to hold the Government to account. Yet one of his first acts is to use a procedure, for which no precedent has been found, to appoint a nominee of the Executive to a Select Committee instead of a nominee of a Select Committee. Let me make it clear that my comments are in no way motivated by disapproval of either the right hon. Member who is leaving the Select Committee or the right hon. Member who is nominated. My objections are principled ones to the procedure that is being used.

Our Standing Orders provide an acceptable route that should be used to move people from and on to Select Committees. No real reason has been given for not using that procedure in the case that we are considering. The best thing that the Leader of the House can do is stand up when I sit down and say that she plans to withdraw the motion to allow the Committee of Selection to meet on 8 or 9 October and the names to go through in the normal way. If she does not do that, I fear that the debate will continue for some time and, unless we get far better reasons than I have heard so far, I am minded to advise the House to reject the motion.

5.36 pm

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), who is greatly respected in the House for his position as Chairman of an important disciplinary Committee and for his experience as a distinguished Back Bencher and a former Minister. The Leader of the House should listen when someone such as my right hon. Friend raises considerable concerns about the procedure that the Government are adopting.

During the former Prime Minister's final Question Time, which was a memorable occasion, he said, in reply to my question:

"I like the hon. Gentleman."—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2007: Vol. 462, c. 331.]

I say that with some pride—some people may ask why, but I took the comment with pride. He then went on to say other things—*[Interruption.]* They were all quite complimentary. I hope that it does not embarrass the right hon. and learned Lady when I say that I like her. We have held several discussions since she became Leader of the House and I have greatly appreciated those conversations. I know that she intends to be committed to the House, its independence and its integrity. However, by pressing the motion, she somewhat undermines the credibility of the assurances that she has given me.

I speak as someone who now takes a huge interest in the procedures of the House. I am prepared to admit from the Back Benches that one of my raisons d'être in the House is not only to continue to represent my constituency of Macclesfield and the interests of the country, but to stand up for the integrity and independence of the House of Commons in trying to hold the Government of the day to account. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire made an excellent speech, and from the Conservative Benches I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on the clarity of the case that he advanced in advising the right hon. and learned Lady to withdraw the motion.

May I sincerely ask the right hon. and learned Lady a question that I put in an intervention, but to which she did not respond? In moving the motion to put the right hon. Member for Leicester, East on the Home Affairs Committee, is it not the Government's intention that he should be the Chairman of that Committee? She did not answer that question earlier, perhaps because in a way she did not want to. She is quite right: it is not for the House of Commons as a whole to dictate who should be the Chairman of that Committee. That is the responsibility of the Home Affairs Committee. In an earlier intervention I made certain observations about the individual being put forward. I was not making any—how shall I put it?—subjective judgments on the matter, but the right hon. Gentleman had featured in a report by an important Committee of the House. Therefore, it ill behoves the Leader of the House to bring forward an exceptional motion, for which, as I believe my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire has established, there is no precedent.

The Chairman of the Committee of Selection chairs that Committee ably and with distinction. I have considerable respect for her as a representative of a constituency in Scotland—I am not going to say her constituency, as I fear that I would not get my tongue round all the names in it. I know her well. She served as a positive and involved member of the Select

[Sir Nicholas Winterton]

Committee on Procedure, and I respect her view and the role that she plays in the House. I hope that the Chairman of the Committee of Selection will seek to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I find it interesting that she is not involved in the motion. I accept that the motion is unique, in so far as an important Standing Order that provides safeguards for the House is being ignored.

John Bercow: Given that we have been advised by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) that the Committee of Selection was told on Monday that there was no business for it to consider, does my hon. Friend think that the Government always intended to circumvent that Committee, or is it his supposition that the idea of proposing the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) as a member of the Home Affairs Committee has occurred to them only since Monday?

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I suppose that we have to accept at face value what the Leader of House has told us—that on Monday, and apparently on Tuesday, the Government had no business to put to the Committee. Bearing in mind the fact that, as we have heard from a number of contributors to this debate, the Prime Minister formed his Government by appointing Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State and Under-Secretaries some time ago, it seems strange that the Leader of the House, for whom—I repeat—I have considerable affection and regard, should not have put the motion to the House until the penultimate day before we break for the summer recess and that the Government should be ignoring the provisions of Standing Order No. 121 on the nomination of Select Committees.

It has been made clear, not least by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey, that there is no reason why the Select Committee should not continue under the very positive and able acting chairmanship of the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). Nobody has a better reputation for outspokenness and integrity than he does. I would have thought that the Home Affairs Committee could continue its work under his chairmanship, but no contributor to the debate has told the House what work the Committee is to undertake between now and 8 October when the House meets again following the summer recess. I am going to throw in the following, as it has not been mentioned so far: if the House wants value for money, it appears strange to appoint a Chairman who will be paid the full rate as a Select Committee Chairman when he and his Committee are to do very little, if anything, on behalf of the House or the people of this country for the next two and a half months.

I feel very deeply about this matter, because the Standing Orders of the House are a safeguard for the House in standing up to the power and influence of the Executive. We are being asked to suspend Standing Orders, and that is an abuse of the House, as I said to the Leader of the House in a point of order before the debate began. May I make a plea, to add to the requests made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire and the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey? If the right hon. and learned Lady is serious about being even-handed in her role as Leader of the House and about representing the interests of all Members of the House and not just her own political party, she will take our request to withdraw the motion very seriously indeed. I hope that she will accede to that request.

I am not going to refer to the right hon. and learned Lady's attainment in due course of the chairmanship of the Modernisation Committee, but I look forward to working with her—I say that with total commitment and sincerity and sometimes against the wishes of some of my colleagues—because I fervently believe in the integrity and sovereignty of the House of Commons in dealing with the Executive. Will she therefore represent the interests of the House by withdrawing the motion?

5.48 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): When the Leader of the House reads her speech on this matter, I think that she will find it rather distressing. It contained a number of contentions, some of which seemed straightforwardly contradictory. I do not wish to beat her around the head with a broom, but one of her propositions was that it was inappropriate to have a Cabinet Minister on a Select Committee, yet she herself is now going to be nominated by a member of the Executive to sit on a Select Committee. The sheer inconsistency of that is remarkable. It leaps out at us: Home Affairs, Ms Harriet Harman, the Leader of the House. A member of the Executive—a member of the Cabinet—is directing to the House's attention a particular Member who they wish to become a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee. Indeed, most of us suppose that it is the intention that the nominee should become Chairman of that Committee. I do not think for one moment that the matter was allowed to go to the Committee of Selection. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and we have also heard and read out the Standing Orders. No one in the House can be unaware of the Standing Orders; they are quite clear. Yet the proper process by which we arrive at such decisions has been bypassed and neutered.

I know that there is often a guiding hand behind what we do, but this is not a guiding hand out of sight. This has been brought right into the Chamber and it amounts to an assertion of Executive power over us. In fact, it means setting aside the very position of the Committee of Selection. This has been exhaustively argued and pointed out by a member of that Committee. Indeed, the Chairman of the Committee of Selection is in her place.

Like many others, I am puzzled about the "urgent work" that requires the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) to be appointed in this way on this day. It is simply an assertion. There is no evidence of a programme in position; the Committee is functioning properly; a report is demonstrably coming up.

Let me give a cheer for my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). I have noted the work that he has done over many years. His assiduity and commitment to the Home Affairs Committee is phenomenal. He is probably the most

regular attender of Home Affairs questions in the whole House—dismissed. But that is not good enough for the Executive. Just in case the Committee of Selection were to override all the Whips on it and choose another Member—that, too, would be inappropriate. That is why we find this name on the Order Paper. It is not right; we all know it is not right.

The absurdity of placing the Leader of the House in the position of arguing an unarguable case with contradictory reasoning actually diminishes her in carrying out her vital role. We who believe in the House of Commons know full well that the role of Leader of the House is a difficult one. The occupier of the position is not only the representative of the Government, but the representative of the House of Commons to the Government. That is the classic definition, and we shall return to this issue later today when we debate another motion on the Floor of the House. That will also be contested.

What I am saying is that we all know that this is wrong. It will not do. Furthermore, the arguments adduced for this proposition are demonstrably contradictory. I think that this House should confidently ask—and expect to be heard by the Leader of the House—for this motion to be withdrawn. That is what I ask of the Leader of the House. The credibility of our system of managing this House is at stake. There is a balance between ordinary Members and the Executive, but this is a manifestation of total Executive dominance. That is what sticks in the craw of many of us.

5.53 pm

Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch, East) (Lab): I would like to put on record the fact that the Committee of Selection offered to meet on Monday night. The Government had no business. The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) said that the Committee of Selection could have met on Tuesday or Wednesday this week, but the Standing Orders do not allow that. We would not have been able to put anything on the Order Paper unless we had met on Monday night. Because we did not meet then, what is happening now is the only action open to the Government in order to get something placed on the Order Paper.

Having said that, I accept some of the concerns of my colleagues, particularly the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) who sits on the Committee with me. It would be helpful if the Leader of the House were able to give us an assurance that this is most unusual and that she will do everything in her power to ensure that this process is not usurped again in any circumstances. If she could do that, I think that the House would accept it. We frequently amend Standing Orders, so that is not the issue. What we must do is ask the Leader of the House to give us an assurance that this is an unusual process and that she will do everything in her power to make sure that it does not happen again.

5.54 pm

Ms Harman: In response to the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), I should say that the Modernisation Committee is different from other Select Committees. It has always been chaired by the Leader of the House—*[Interruption.]* That always has been the case by custom and practice.

Departmental Select Committees are never chaired by Cabinet Ministers. I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch, East (Rosemary McKenna) that this is an exceptional process, and it is not one that I would want to hurry into on any future occasion. I accept that it is exceptional.

We have arrived at this position because the Home Affairs Committee has lost its Chair because of his appointment to the Cabinet. That is not the case with other Select Committees. I resent the suggestion that, by proposing a name for the House to vote on in substitution for another hon. Member, I am somehow questioning the competence or ability of all the other members of the Committee. I am most certainly not doing that. Far from it—least of all with regard to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). That is not my point. I am not saying that they are not all competent and able. Of course they are.

What I am fundamentally proposing is that the House move a currently serving member of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) is, to serve as a member of the Home Affairs Committee. If he is suitable, as we believe he is, for the House to vote him on to the Constitutional Affairs Committee, he is suitable also for the House to vote him on to the Home Affairs Committee.

I do not accept, either, that Select Committees do nothing over the summer. Whether or not they do nothing is a matter for them. I know that many of them are extremely active over the summer.

I want to correct something. I said that the Prime Minister had to deal with the appointment of Cabinet Ministers, junior Ministers and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries. I should have added Parliamentary Private Secretaries as well, because those are subsequent to the appointment of Parliamentary Under-Secretaries. It was not until it was clear who were going to be Parliamentary Private Secretaries and to what Department they would be allocated that we were in a position to know who might be available for the Home Affairs Committee.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): The Leader of the House said that the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) would be moved from the Constitutional Affairs Committee to the Home Affairs Committee. Where on the Order Paper does it say that he will be moved from that Committee?

Ms Harman: What I perhaps should say is that my right hon. Friend has been voted by this House on to the Constitutional Affairs Committee. Clearly, the House regarded him as suitable for that. I am asking the House to consider him—*[Interruption.]* I presume he stays on both Committees unless he is removed from the Constitutional Affairs Committee. I do not, however, accept the argument that Select Committees have nothing to do over the summer.

I was asked about the salary of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and

[Ms Harman]

Skills as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. I am advised that the House's resolution of 2003, which deals with pay for Select Committee Chairs, provides that the salary ceases if the member becomes a Minister. No Select Committee salary will have been paid to my right hon. Friend since his appointment to the Cabinet.

I have listened to what Members have said, and I register the vehemence with which they have stated their argument; however, I considered that argument before I brought the motion before the House. I acknowledge that this is an exceptional procedure, and that it would have been better if there had been time for the matter to go before the Committee of Selection. It would be easier on me if I could simply withdraw the motion as a new and persuasive argument had caused me to change my mind—but I anticipated the argument that has been made.

I did not anticipate, however, that Members would think that there was a conspiracy behind the motion; I had hoped that they would accept that there was a question to do with timing as we are approaching the end of the Session. As Leader of the House, I must listen to the arguments that are made and work out whether it is right to put a motion to the House. In effect, this motion places a current member of the Constitutional Affairs Committee on to the Home Affairs Committee. We must make sure that we do not fail to see the wood for the trees; we must understand that that is the subject that we would vote on.

John Bercow: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Ms Harman: No. I have given way a number of times.

I come to be Leader of the House at a time when there are a great many changes strengthening the position of the House, and I fully support them. We have had independent scrutiny of appointments for the first time; we will have topical debates so that Members can swiftly ask questions of Ministers on behalf of their constituents; more Bills have been published in draft; we have had pre-legislative scrutiny; we are moving on to having post-legislative scrutiny; and we are publishing for the first time the draft legislative programme.

The work of the Leader of the House is important, and I stand by my commitment to do it in the interests of the House. However, it is also important to keep a sense of proportion. This motion is in order. It moves the Member concerned from the Constitutional Affairs Committee to the Home Affairs Committee. *[Interruption.]* Let me say that in another way; it takes a Member who has already been voted by the House on to the Constitutional Affairs Committee and places him on the Home Affairs Committee. The motion is in order, and I suggest that the House vote on it.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 85.

Division No. 201] **[6.2 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clegg, Mr. Nick
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Davey, Mr. Edward
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Engel, Natascha
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Don
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hemming, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Holmes, Paul
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, David
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley

Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hunter, Mark
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, Jim
Kramer, Susan
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Lammy, Mr. David
Laws, Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Lepper, David
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Olner, Mr. Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, Mr. Alan
Reid, rh John
Rennie, Willie
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rogerson, Dan
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Thurso, John
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wills, Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Frank Roy and Steve McCabe

NOES

Amess, Mr. David
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Barker, Gregory
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Bone, Mr. Peter
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Browning, Angela
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Francois, Mr. Mark
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hayes, Mr. John
Hendry, Charles
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Price, Adam
Pritchard, Mark
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Rosindell, Andrew
Salmond, rh Mr. Alex
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simpson, David
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spink, Bob
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Tredinnick, David
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Weir, Mr. Mike
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir George Young and Sir Nicholas Winterton

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 121 (Nomination of select committees), Mr John Denham be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Keith Vaz be added.

Machinery of Government

6.17 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): I beg to move,

That, with effect from the beginning of the next session of Parliament, the following amendments and related provisions be made in respect of Standing Orders:

A SELECT COMMITTEES RELATED TO GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the Table in paragraph (2) as follows—
(i) leave out items 2, 5, 12 and 14;
(ii) insert, in the appropriate places, the following items:

Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform	Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform	11
Children, Schools and Families	Department for Children, Schools and Families	14
Innovation, Universities and Skill	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills	14
Justice	Ministry of Justice (including the work of staff provided for the administrative work of courts and tribunals, but excluding consideration of individual cases and appointments, and excluding the work of the Scotland and Wales Offices and of the Advocate General for Scotland); and administration and expenditure of the Attorney General's Office, the Treasury Solicitor's Department, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office (but excluding individual cases and appointments and advice given within government by Law Officers)	14

(iii) in item 9, in column 2, leave out all the words after 'Home Office'.

B RELATED PROVISIONS

(1) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees in this Parliament in respect of the Constitutional Affairs Committee shall be deemed to have been in respect of the Justice Committee.

(2) That all proceedings of the Trade and Industry Committee in this Parliament shall be deemed to have been proceedings of the Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee.

(3) That for the purposes of Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairmen of select committees) the Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee, the Children, Schools and Families Committee, the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee and the Justice Committee shall be deemed to be the same committees as the Trade and Industry Committee, the Education and Skills Committee, the Science and Technology Committee and the Constitutional Affairs Committee respectively.

C LIAISON COMMITTEE

That the Resolution of the House of 13th July 2005 relating to Liaison Committee (Membership) be further amended by leaving out, in paragraph (2), 'Constitutional Affairs', 'Education and Skills', 'Science and Technology' and 'Trade and Industry' and inserting, in the appropriate places, 'Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform', 'Children, Schools and Families', 'Innovation, Universities and Skills' and 'Justice'.

D EUROPEAN STANDING COMMITTEES

That Standing Order No. 119 (European Standing Committees) be amended, by leaving out in the Table in paragraph (6) (i) in respect of European Standing Committee B, 'Department for Constitutional Affairs' and inserting 'Ministry of Justice'; and (ii) in respect of European Standing Committee C, 'Trade and Industry'; Education and Skills' and inserting 'Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform; Innovation, Universities and Skills; Children, Schools and Families'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to consider motion 7,

That Mr Jack Straw and Paddy Tipping be discharged from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and Ms Harriet Harman and Chris Bryant be added.

Ms Harman: This motion is to keep up to date the system of Select Committee scrutiny of the Executive. Today's business has, of course, been presented in the right order, but it would probably have been better to deal with the overall picture by debating this motion before discussing the specific case of the Home Affairs Committee. However, I shall move swiftly on.

Before I go on to explain some of the motions in detail, I would like to set them in the context of the programme of reform announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his statement of 3 July, and in the Green Paper "Governance of Britain".

The Green Paper sets out proposals to give stronger accountability of the Government to Parliament, to assure greater engagement between Parliament and the people and between the Government and the people, and to build strong Cabinet Government. These motions reflect one of those central themes—promoting the holding of Government to account.

Select Committees are one of the House's key tools for holding Government and Ministers to account. Since 1979, the basis of the Select Committee structure has been that there should be a Committee to monitor the work of each principal Department. That was introduced by the then Conservative Government, and supported on all sides. The structure is enshrined in Standing Order No. 152, which is updated from time to time.

In recent months, with the establishment of the Ministry of Justice out of the former Department for Constitutional Affairs, and the more recent establishment of three new Departments, we have seen significant developments that require a number of changes to that Standing Order. Accordingly, the motion provides for new Select Committees to cover the following Departments: Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, Children, Schools and Families, Justice, and Innovation, Universities and Skills. Membership numbers for each Committee are as set out in the motion.

Procedural provisions are included in the motion to allow continuity between the work of old Select Committees and the new ones, so far as is possible. The new Justice Committee continues the work of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, albeit enlarged in size and with a wider remit. The other Committees are, procedurally, new Committees.

I want to say something about the importance of science and technology. Overall responsibility in Government for science and innovation issues was located in the Department of Trade and Industry until the recent machinery of government changes; it now forms a core part of the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. There has been great concern in the science community—I have myself received a number of representations from science organisations—about ensuring the continuance of the work of the Science and Technology Committee, so that science issues, particularly ones that cut across Departments, will continue to be properly scrutinised. I have received representations from: the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), Chair of the Science and Technology Committee; Professor Broers, Chair of the Lords Science and Technology Committee; the Campaign for Science and Engineering in the UK; the Chemical Industries Association; Professor Derek Burke, who was special adviser to the Science and Technology Committee between 1995 and 2001; the Genetic Interest Group; the Royal Society; the Institute of Biology; the Association of Medical Research Charities and many more. I have considered those representations carefully, and the proposal before the House aims to accommodate the key concerns effectively.

We propose that the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee, instead of being a Committee of 11 members—as it would otherwise have been—should have 14 members. If the Committee chooses to have a Sub-Committee covering science and technology issues, it will be able to operate that Sub-Committee, in effect, as a successor to the current Science and Technology Committee.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I very much welcome the tone of the right hon. and learned Lady's remarks. Will the Sub-Committee have the same support, in terms of staffing and other resources, as the current Science and Technology Committee? If not, it will be unable to carry out a full cross-cutting Government role.

Ms Harman: That would have to be looked at. I note that although all the representations I received very much welcomed the machinery of government changes, they absolutely did not want to lose the cross-cutting work on science that the Committee chaired by the hon. Gentleman has been undertaking.

Members will note that the motion provides for the changes to take effect at the beginning of the next Session, which is to allow the necessary membership changes to be in place before the formal start date for the new Committees. If that were not done, the Education and Skills Committee, the Science and Technology Committee and the Trade and Industry Committee would disappear without effective Committees being put in their place.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Leader of the House explain why membership of the Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, which will replace the Committee on Trade and Industry, has been reduced in number when its responsibilities have been increased?

Ms Harman: As I shall explain in a moment, there will be a Committee whose core responsibility will be to look specifically at regulation issues and its work will run alongside the work of the Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee.

We do not want the existing Committees to disappear with no effective Committees to replace them. That would create a gap of some time in the pattern of accountability of Government to Committees in respect of the three Departments, which would not be right.

The 1979 departmental Select Committee structure has served the House well. The changes before the House today are necessary to allow the House to take forward effectively the valuable and continuing work of holding each Department to account. I thank the Chairs of the Committees that are being disestablished under the motion—my hon. Friend the Member for

[Ms Harman]

Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff), and the hon. Member for Harrogate—and all the members of their Committees for their work on behalf of the House. Of course, the Committee of Selection may nominate many of the same Members to the new Committees, in which case my thanks, though very sincere, may be somewhat premature.

I turn to the motion adding me to the Modernisation Committee in place of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor. The inclusion of that work in our manifesto was a public indication of the importance that we attributed to it. I am pleased to see the way in which the House has changed for the better. The current departmental Select Committee system was introduced in 1979, but the pace of change has increased since then, particularly through the impetus of the Modernisation Committee.

The legislative changes that have taken place include the ability to carry over public Bills, more pre-legislative scrutiny, better information provided to Members and the public and the introduction of evidence-taking Public Bill Committees. For the first time this year, the Government's draft legislative programme has been published for consultation several months before the Queen's Speech. Additional opportunities have been provided for Back-Bench scrutiny via the establishment of Westminster Hall. Written ministerial statements have replaced planted questions; notice time for oral questions has been reduced; and the Prime Minister now appears before the Liaison Committee twice a year.

A raft of measures has been aimed at improving the way in which the House engages with the public as well—with changes to the language, improvements to the website, and increased facilities and resources available to the education unit.

I am aware that some Members feel that the Procedure Committee, which existed before 1997, was capable of carrying out such work. The Procedure Committee has done, and continues to do, valuable work, but there is still a role for a separate Modernisation Committee, which has wider terms of reference and can look beyond the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business to consider issues such as engagement with the public and the working lives of Members. It is clear that, as in the past, the two Committees will need to be chaired in a way that ensures that both have the right and complementary work loads.

I know, too, that some Members continue to believe that a Committee of the House should not be chaired by a Cabinet Minister. Ultimately, that is a matter for the House and for the Committee itself, but the Committee has been chaired by the Leader of the House since its inception in 1997. The Leader of the House has a unique position both as the Government's representative in the House and as the House's representative in the Government. The past Chairmen of the Modernisation Committee have chaired the Committee on a consensual, cross-party basis to deliver reforms to the benefit of the whole House. I made my position clear during my first business statement, when I said that I was fully committed to continuing that tradition as Leader of the House, and I stand by that commitment.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton)—it says here—for his expression of support for my election as the Chairman of the Modernisation Committee. Notwithstanding the previous debate, I hope that I will be able to work with him. He is a long-standing and committed member of the Committee. I commend the motions to the House.

6.27 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Select Committees do an extremely important job in holding the Government to account. Indeed, we should be grateful to all those who serve on Select Committees for the important work that they do. Their work brings focus to particular themes and aspects of legislation; their membership brings expertise; and in large part, their independent spirit brings an objectivity to parliamentary scrutiny, which is, of course, why we have just had such a heated debate on the previous motion.

Debating the Standing Orders that relate to changes in the machinery of government would normally be nothing more than a formality, or perhaps undertaken in a slightly different atmosphere, but on this occasion, the Standing Orders have some political significance, because they reflect the Government's continuous changes to the make-up of Whitehall. That betrays an obsession with spin and structures, a lack of delivery and a disregard for taxpayers' money.

Before the Prime Minister's latest reshuffle of the Whitehall pack, the Government had already wasted £2 million of taxpayers' money on changing the names of Departments. For example, the Department for Transport became the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions, then the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, and then the Department for Transport again. But did it deliver? A train is cancelled every five minutes, bus use is down, and the Government have abandoned their pledge to reduce traffic congestion. Carbon emissions are rising, and council tax has doubled. I am sure the public were delighted that the Government's response to those failures was to change the Department's name three times.

One might have thought that this Prime Minister would have learned from the mistakes of the previous one, but I am afraid that he has not. He has created the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. According to written answers that I have received—buried on busy news days—the new Departments for Children, Schools and Families and for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform have already spent thousands of pounds on new signs and rebranding.

Whatever the worth of continuing to tinker with the machinery of Whitehall, it makes sense that the parliamentary Committees that scrutinise the new Departments should shadow them accurately. I therefore support the changes to the Committees—with one exception. I have a strong reservation about the decision to scrap the Science and Technology

Committee. I heard what the Leader of the House said about the expansion of the number of Members on the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee in order to enable it to have a Sub-Committee to cover that area. However, I question whether that is going to be able to provide the same degree of focus on science issues as the current Science and Technology Committee—particularly in the light of the implications of the latest report of the Modernisation Committee, which will mean that questions to Chairmen of Select Committees will be allowed in the House and there will be more debates on Select Committee reports.

As I understand it, under the structure that the right hon. and learned Lady is setting up, questions would not be able to go to the Chairman of the Sub-Committee, whereas if we retained the Science and Technology Committee, the Chairman of that Committee, and those issues, would be able to have that focus, through questions. The Sub-Committee is no replacement for a stand-alone specialist Science and Technology Committee. Perhaps that is why, in her explanatory memorandum, the right hon. and learned Lady committed a Freudian slip and referred to the new Department as the Department for Innovation, Universities and Science—rather than Skills.

Talking of the new education Departments and Committees, I note something that will be of interest to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman). It seems that the term limits for Committee Chairmen will be unaffected by the changes. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman hoped that he might have the opportunity to continue to serve as Chairman of the Select Committee, so I commiserate with him. It is a poor reward for his dedicated service to successive Labour Secretaries of State for Education.

Perhaps the Government are putting this measure through because they have even more people to put on the Select Committees who they believe are going to take the Government line. That brings me to the fact that the Prime Minister thinks that it is acceptable for Parliamentary Private Secretaries to sit on Select Committees.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is developing her argument with her usual fluency, but at such a pace that I am afraid that my addled brain was not entirely able to keep up with the flow. My ears pricked up at her reference to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman). When is his tenure to end?

Mrs. May: I believe that the hon. Member for Huddersfield has already served coming up to the length of time that one is entitled to serve as a Chairman of a Select Committee. Certainly, he would not get two further terms under the motion, which means that the incoming Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families is, in effect, the Education and Skills Committee that has existed until now.

I raised the issue of Parliamentary Private Secretaries with the Leader of the House last week in business questions. We should be absolutely clear that Parliamentary Private Secretaries work for Ministers and owe their jobs and careers to Ministers. I do not believe that they can properly hold Ministers to account. That is a clear conflict of interest and it should not be allowed to continue. They should not sit on Select Committees.

John Bercow: I am sorry to trespass on my right hon. Friend's generosity—and generosity it certainly is. I put it to her, as I put it to the Leader of the House last week, that it is a question not only of the constitutional impropriety of the proposal, but of the fact that Labour Back Benchers who wish to be dedicated and independent scrutineers of Government will be crowded out if PPSs take their role. It falls to us to defend the rights of Labour Back Benchers.

Mrs. May: My hon. Friend has made his point extremely well and with his characteristic fluency and passion. He always gives a passionate defence of the rights of Back Benchers, and he is entirely right. There are two aspects to the matter. The first is that Parliamentary Private Secretaries are not likely to be assiduous challengers and scrutineers of the Government. The second is that if they are members of Select Committees, the number of spaces available to Labour Back Benchers is reduced, and I am surprised that the Leader of the House—the defender of Members' rights—is accepting the proposal, although she indicated that she would in business questions last week.

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I support the idea of championing the rights of Back Benchers on Select Committees, but does the right hon. Lady agree that her ideas should extend to Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen? In the previous Parliament, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) was both a Front-Bench Defence spokesman and a member of the Defence Committee, and he had to be dragged off the Committee kicking and screaming.

Mrs. May: The point is for members of Select Committees to challenge the Government. The Select Committees challenge not Opposition policy, but the Government. The point about Parliamentary Private Secretaries is that they are effectively members of the Government, so their ability—and, I suggest, willingness—to challenge the Government may be somewhat different from that of other Members.

Mr. Jones: What the right hon. Lady says is interesting. I remember the card of the hon. Member for Aldershot, which said "Shadow Minister for Defence and deputy chairman of the Defence Committee". Committee members are supposed to come to a Select Committee to listen to evidence on all sides of the argument. Does the right hon. Lady not see that there is a complete contradiction if they are also Front Benchers who argue the case for an Opposition party?

Mrs. May: I repeat what I just said to the hon. Gentleman: my point about Parliamentary Private Secretaries concerns their ability to challenge the Government. Unless I am very much mistaken, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) is far from being a member of the Government, and he

[Mrs. May]

is an assiduous challenger and scrutineer of them in all that they do, particularly when it comes to defence matters.

We are also considering the motion relating to membership of the Modernisation Committee, on which I serve. I should say to the Leader of the House that I do not share the concerns that some of my hon. Friends have about whether that Committee should be chaired by the Leader of the House—that is, by a member of the Government. The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), was wont to say that the Committee's advantage was that it was chaired by a member of the Government, and its disadvantage was that it was chaired by a member of the Government. It is a difficult one, and, as I say, I do not share the concerns about whether a Government member should chair the Committee. However, as the Leader of the House will know, I am concerned about the fact that she is chairman and deputy leader of the Labour party, as well as a member, and potentially the Chair, of that Select Committee.

On the chairmanship of Select Committees, one reason why we had such a heated debate on the previous motion was that it was implied that the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) was being put on the Home Affairs Committee in order to chair it. In fact, it was more than an implication; the Leader of the House actually said as much in her speech. Indeed, one of her arguments for the introduction of the motion was that without him, there would be no Chairman.

Mr. Jones *rose—*

Mrs. May: I will be generous and give way to the hon. Gentleman again.

Mr. Jones: In an earlier Parliament, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) was not on the Defence Committee, but the Conservative party put him on the Committee to become Chair.

Mrs. May: I am not sure that that has any relevance to what I am saying about the Executive bringing a motion before the House and determining—not after the Committee met, but when the motion was before the House—that a certain individual should become a Committee Chairman. The Executive should, rather, leave that to the House. I have a concern about the Leader of the House's membership of the Modernisation Committee because of the multiplicity of her roles.

Mr. Bone: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a solution to the problem might be for the Lord High Chancellor, who has been given only half a Department to run, to continue to chair the Modernisation Committee?

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion. When he was the Chairman of the Committee, the present Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor chaired it with great integrity and brought forward a number of significant proposals that change the relative balance between the Executive and the Members of the House. I look forward to the Leader of the House tabling motions that will put into practice the results of the Committee's inquiry into enhancing the role of the Back Bencher, which will have been of particular interest to my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) and for Buckingham (John Bercow), who are both assiduous in exercising their role as effective Back Benchers.

The motion also makes changes to the European Standing Committees. Instead of tinkering with those Committees—the motion merely changes their names—why does not the right hon. and learned Lady reform them properly? If she and the Prime Minister are serious about putting Parliament first, they need to improve our system for scrutinising European legislation. That means a proper scrutiny reserve, an end to the failed European Standing Committee system, and measures to hold Ministers to account on the Floor of the House. As it happens, I made a speech setting out a number of proposals in this area last week, and I would be very happy to send it to the right hon. and learned Lady if she wished to know what those were.

The motion is significant not only for what it contains, but for what it does not contain. I have just referred to the latest report of the Modernisation Committee, which dealt with enhancing the role of the Back Bencher. It contained important proposals to make Select Committees more accountable to other hon. Members. Those included questions to Select Committee Chairman and debates on Committee reports. Despite the report being approved, published and promoted by the last Leader of the House, it has still not been put into effect. When she responds to the debate, perhaps the right hon. and learned Lady will say when those proposals are likely to be brought before the House so that they can be put into practice.

What of the Prime Minister's proposal that Select Committees should have the power to scrutinise public appointments? We had a debate earlier on the nomination for the chairmanship of the Statistics Board—the one public appointment that goes before a Select Committee of the House, the Treasury Committee. I support the concept. It was recommended by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) in his democracy taskforce report, which was recently published. If the Prime Minister is so keen to strengthen Parliament and so keen to give new powers to Select Committees, why has not that innovation been included in today's motion on the machinery of government?

What of the Prime Minister's proposal for regional Ministers and regional Select Committees? I have some questions about the role of regional Select Committees. The regional Ministers are in place, but the corresponding regional Select Committees have not been established. There are considerable problems with the concept of regional Ministers. They do nothing to address the fundamental problem of the Prime Minister's constitutional reforms, notably the West Lothian question. They will create split accountability between the regional Ministers and the departmental Ministers. They risk more frequent conflicts of interest between Members' ministerial, regional and constituency concerns, and they are based on regions that exist only in bureaucrats' minds.

For example, I should be interested to know what the Minister for the South East, the hon. Member for

Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw) knows about my constituency, Maidenhead. The problems of his constituency are quite different from those in mine. The regional Ministers do not seem to have any executive powers, in which case what is their purpose? I come back to the point that I made a little earlier. The regional Ministers have been appointed. Why have not the Committees that scrutinise them been established? After all, the Prime Minister promised the two together.

Today's motion is not as uncontroversial as similar motions usually are. It is right to change the structure of Select Committees to mirror the changes in Government Departments. It is right for the sake of parliamentary accountability for the House to keep up with changes in Whitehall, but that does not mean that I will support the motion with any enthusiasm, because it betrays many things about the Government. It betrays an obsession with structures, not delivery, a disregard for taxpayers' money, and a Prime Minister who, far from trusting Parliament, is intent on continuing the spin.

6.44 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I think that, with the exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner), I am the longest-serving current member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology. I have served under three Chairmen—Michael Clark, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), and now the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis).

As right hon. and hon. Members will know, I am, as a chemist, pretty close to the science and technology community. The first inkling of the opposition in the science community to the Government's proposals was when I attended the parliamentary affairs committee of the Royal Society of Chemistry a few days after the announcements. It is not only chemists who sit round that table but members of most of the other professional organisations. Initially they were not only surprised but somewhat outraged by the proposal to disband the Science and Technology Committee. As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) said, that Committee was created by the previous Administration to create in the House a greater focus on science and technology. The scientific community out there has recognised that focus and has been very supportive of the work of the members of the Committee throughout its lifetime. We have to try to send out the right signal—that the volume and quality of work will continue under the new structure.

I have no doubt that the Government's intentions in creating the new Select Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills were honourable, and I think that it is the right way forward in terms of focusing the House's responsibilities on those areas. However, I am a little wary about the creation of a science and technology Sub-Committee. The main departmental Committee will consider the research councils—that will be one of its important remits—and science, engineering and technology in the universities, but it will also have to focus on other university-related issues in the arts and humanities, as well as medical schools and so on. Moreover, the Leitch report will demand that it focus to a much greater extent than the House has focused before on the skills agenda. We are constantly picking up on the fact that there is a great shortage of skills in the science, technology and engineering world.

I am particularly concerned about the amount of resources that the Sub-Committee will have. My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House has already said that things might not turn out to be as bad as some of us suspect. I remind her, however, of the volume of work that we do at the moment, with seven to nine reports a year. Even taking out the work that the main Committee will do, I doubt whether the Sub-Committee could get through annually two or three major reports such as the space policy report that we have just published, or the marine science report that is due out. It takes at least nine months to collect the evidence, written and oral, and we travel extensively collecting evidence from abroad. We in this country must constantly measure ourselves against the best, which is usually America but also Japan, Germany and France. We have to travel to see what people are doing there. Would adequate resources be available to provide sufficient Clerks and secretarial support for the Committee, and to allow its members to travel?

I recognise that the Government intend to put 14 Members on the main Committee, whereas there are only 11 members of the Science and Technology Committee. Even so, I would guesstimate that there would be only five or six members on the Sub-Committee. Has my right hon. and learned Friend had any thoughts about that? I realise that the decision might be made by the main Committee.

My main point is this. I find serving on a Select Committee, if one is assiduous in turning up to most of the meetings, reading the reports and going on the visits, quite hard work, and I think that most Members would agree, whatever Committee they sit on. A scientist lucky enough to serve on the main Committee covering the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills who is also sitting on the Sub-Committee will find that they have a considerable extra volume of work, and members of the Sub-Committee will probably also want to listen to debates in the main Committee. At the same time, the Government are creating regional Committees. We are asking an awful lot of Members by creating this extra work alongside the other work that they are involved in, which I find increases all the time.

The reports produced by the present Science and Technology Committee have been excellent. It has published cross-cutting reports on many Departments, and considered agencies outside those Departments. We have turned over stones that I do not think people wanted us to turn over; we have looked into nooks and crannies. I ask my right hon. and learned Friend whether the smaller number of members on the Sub-Committee would be given a strong remit to turn over stones that need turning over and to look into nooks and crannies, bearing in mind the fact that those may be areas of other Departments' work. Unless the role of the Sub-Committee, if it is created, is established very firmly and it is given those powers, its work will not be as effective as that of a main Committee. With those thoughts, I look forward to my right hon. and learned Friend's response.

6.51 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): This debate starts from a premise on which we all agree: it is really important that the legislature have effective scrutiny of the Executive. That is what underlies the debate. The Government have said that they are committed to that, and I have no reason—apart from a blip a few minutes ago—to think that that is not true. I look forward to seeing more and more power transferred from Government to Parliament, so that it can hold the Executive to account.

As part of that process, Select Committees were set up; they have now been running for nearly 30 years and have been a valuable addition to the work of the House. As someone who has not sought to pursue a career in that part of Parliament's work, I say thank you to those colleagues who have, and to those whose service on particular Select Committees will come to an end as a result of the motion, if it is passed later on. The Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs is chaired very ably by my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who was its first Chairman. It was set up relatively recently, when the Department for Constitutional Affairs was created, and it has been able to do its job effectively and well. The Select Committee on Education and Skills regularly has to do serious work on behalf of the House. The Select Committee on Trade and Industry self-evidently covers a huge gamut of work, and the Select Committee on Science and Technology, to which I shall come back later, is chaired equally forcefully and effectively by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). I say thank you to them for the very important work that they have done.

We are here because the change of Prime Minister last month meant that there were changes to Departments. There is nothing wrong with that; the Government are entitled to organise themselves in the way that they think efficient. However, we have taken the view that when a new Prime Minister—or an existing one—wishes to change the structure of Government, those changes should be subject to consultation with Parliament before they are implemented. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made the point that there is a danger that the idea of change is never entirely thought through, and is then undone, or re-done. There have been occasions when a name is invented, then uninvented, because after they had had to write it down for a day or two, people realised the mnemonic for the Department's name was embarrassing.

Putting aside the cost to the public purse, I want to make the strong case that a process in which Departments and the parliamentary organisation of Select Committees change should be the subject of considered, not rushed, decision. There is no reason why the process that we discussed earlier—the scrutiny of a nomination of a person to an important job—should not be paralleled by the scrutiny of a proposal to change a Department. I will give one example, which is not the main subject of the debate.

The proposal to abolish the Department of Trade and Industry, which my colleagues supported and promoted for a long time, is significant. We believe that it was right to do that, but it should be done in a way that has been tested, and when parliamentarians have presented a view, with evidence, to say that we are persuaded by the proposal.

Mr. Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I can give my hon. Friend an even stronger example to bear out his argument. It is the creation of the Ministry of Justice, about which the Lord Chief Justice read in a Sunday newspaper. Indeed, the Lord Chancellor heard about it only a couple of days beforehand. The failure to sort that out carefully in advance has led to a continuing and unresolved constitutional argument between the judiciary and the Government.

Simon Hughes: Not only is my right hon. Friend correct, as I would expect him to be, but he was the first to know the facts. When the Lord Chief Justice gave evidence before his Committee, he said that he had read about the changes in a Sunday paper. Clearly, that is a disgraceful and appalling way in which to do business. We ended up with a badly constructed new development in Government. Again, Liberal Democrats supported the idea of a Ministry of Justice, so we do not object on principle. We argue that one should decide what exactly is to be included in the remit of such a Department before finalising the change. A debate should be held about it so that we get it right.

The legacy of the decision rumbled on when the Department for Constitutional Affairs changed—not when the Prime Minister changed, but on 8 or 9 May—into the Ministry of Justice. It meant that that Department did all the things that we associate with justice and also dealt with the legacy of constitutional affairs, which are logically not necessarily justice matters. We have now ended up with slight confusion, as well as the great confusion to which my right hon. Friend referred.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) rightly said that we expected part of the consequence of the Government changes to be that we would consider today proposals for Select Committees to reflect the roles of the new regional Ministers. We are in favour of such Select Committees. However, I hope that the absence of a proposal on the Order Paper means that the Government are thinking more carefully about exactly what they will introduce. I hope that they have learned the benefit of delaying a bit and getting matters right. Clearly, such Committees should not include Parliamentary Private Secretaries, but should reflect the political balance of the relevant region. One cannot expect a proper discussion of regional issues if the Committees are all biased and take no account of the balance of the political views in those regions. My colleagues and I will continue to have that discussion with the Leader of the House.

The most controversial aspect of the changes, and the preceding changes, is the implication that the Science and Technology Committee should go. A Sub-Committee of another Committee—however good its members—is not an adequate substitute. I am not a scientist—I did maths A-level—but I have always tried in this place to support scientific activities. I have seen the merit of the work of the Office of Science and Technology. I have followed with interest the work of the Science and Technology Committee. I have noted

its investigations and the effectiveness of its conclusions. I have heard about the results of its cross-party work, whether on our place in the global exploration of space—the subject of the recent report that dealt not only with the east midlands headquarters of our space activity but other aspects too—or the inquiry that was recently launched into the science and technology of the controversial issue of abortion. That work is valuable.

I regret that the implication of the proposal is that we are to lose that cross-cutting, cross-departmental scrutiny, which has been such a good thing. It used to happen in Westminster Hall, but those cross-cutting debates have gone, and that is a pity. I do not make those comments simply because my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough chairs the Committee and might be rude to me later if I did not say nice things about it. He has made no such threats. I objectively believe that this is not the way to go. Had there been consultation, and had the Government listened to the voices, we would not be here. I am sad that they have failed to do that.

In motion 7, the Leader of the House has brought to us a logical motion, which suggests that she will follow the tradition of her predecessors and chair the Modernisation Committee. It is good that we have a Modernisation Committee. I want it to be robust in its proposals. I have no doubt that she intends to be robust in what she contributes to it, again on a cross-party basis. Therefore, we have no objection to the new Leader of the House taking over from the previous Leader of the House in that role, or to the supporting consequential change. We will contribute positively to that.

Our objective, which I began with, remains: to see power transferred from the Government to Parliament, from the Executive to the legislature. We want this place to be increasingly effective, not just in science and technology but everywhere. I hope that there can be an agreement to work towards that end and to do things carefully and correctly in future, rather than just taking the Government's word that this structure of government works and that we must all buy into it, whatever the implications.

7.1 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I do not want to repeat many of the comments that were made earlier, so I shall try to be as brief as possible. I start on a positive note. One of the science community's major concerns has arisen because the Government have been so supportive of science. It is important to put it on the record that the resources going into science, particularly since 1999, have been a huge success story, and include £3.4 billion to research councils. That has fuelled high expectations of the Government's involvement in science. It is important to start with that positive comment, rather than with some of the negative ones.

I should like to continue in the tenor of the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), who calmly and temperately explained many of the reasons for concern about the loss of the Science and Technology Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) echoed those reasons.

I support the establishment of the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Bringing together the university sector, which delivers so much of our research, and the research councils, which pay for much of it, is long overdue and will mean that we are able to plan much more effectively. The whole House agrees with the need for a departmental Committee to scrutinise the new Department, as the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made clear. That must be right. Also, certain aspects of the Science and Technology Committee's current role, particularly its scrutiny of the office of science and innovation and the office of the Government's chief scientific adviser, have moved to the Department, so I accept, too, that it is quite logical for those aspects to be scrutinised by the new Committee.

However, the main concern for the science community, for business and for members of the Committee—I pay tribute to all its members, who serve it extraordinarily well and put in an enormous amount of time—is about cross-governmental scrutiny of science. I know that other Committees scrutinise across Government—the Public Accounts Committee is obviously the most notable one—but the Science and Technology Committee looks not only at the nooks and crannies, as the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East said, but at science right across Government. Some of the examples of the former Committee's cross-cutting inquiries include its work on human technologies and the law, which has resulted in a draft Bill being considered by both Houses and a new Bill on embryos and tissues, which will be introduced in the Queen's Speech in October. All that began with the Committee's work.

The Committee carried out work on forensic science, and the Leader of the House appeared before the Committee during the follow-up to that inquiry. That work showed that forensic science was covered by various Government Departments, but particularly by various parts of the then Home Office. It also carried out work on identity card technology, on the classification of illegal drugs, on the regulation of hybrids and chimeras, on carbon capture and storage, on space policy and on ocean science. Those are all cross-cutting subjects that involve different Departments in making their contribution to the science agenda.

A big mistake—if I may be so bold—that the Leader of the House and her colleagues made when considering replacing the Science and Technology Select Committee was to believe that it mainly scrutinised the Office of Science and Innovation. In fact, most of the Ministers who appeared before it were from other Departments; they had nothing to do with science and innovation per se. This is the exciting thing about a cross-government scrutiny Committee. For example, when we were considering space policy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was the lead Department for some of the new space technologies. Similarly, when we were looking at forensic science, we dealt with the Home Office. So such a Committee would not be a case of double jeopardy for Ministers in the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. In fact, the work would be spread quite widely across the arena.

To be frank, the amount of support for the Committee from outside the House took me by surprise. The Leader of the House made clear reference to some of the letters that she had received. Moreover, on 13 July, a letter was published in *The Times* which had been signed by the Royal Society of Chemistry, the

[Mr. Phil Willis]

Institute of Physics, the Institute of Biology, the Campaign for Science and Engineering, and the Geology Society of London. It stated:

"At a time when the Government has brought science and innovation policy centre stage with the welcome creation of the new Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, it would be a tragedy if its immediate parliamentary consequence was the abolition of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology."

On 20 July, in an open letter to the Leader of the House, Lord Rees at the Royal Society emphasised:

"This Committee does a great deal of vital work scrutinising scientific matters and the use of evidence across government departments".

When the president of the Royal Society, four Nobel laureates, 30 other distinguished scientists and the organisation Sense About Science say that this is an organisation within Parliament that they want to save, we really should take notice of them.

It was not just the academics who expressed a view. Mark Henderson, the lead science correspondent for *The Times* said:

"science will never fit into a neat departmental box: it is important to each and every arm of the government."

I believe that that is readily accepted. The Science Council made it clear that the Committee

"has been able to address issues from the broad perspective and publish reports that required a joined-up Government response".

Richard Lambert, the general secretary of the CBI, said:

"A particular issue for business is ensuring that DIUS maintains a strong economic focus".

He went on to say that

"a strong S & T committee would be a valuable part of the scrutiny mechanism in this area".

The breadth of support for the Committee's cross-cutting role within Parliament is an important factor.

I turn to the solution that the Government are offering. I pay tribute to the Government Chief Whip, who has met me, and other right hon. and hon. Members, on a number of occasions to discuss a way forward. We are pleased that the number of Committee members is to be increased to 14, and that a standing Sub-Committee will be established, but I repeat what I said to the Leader of the House earlier, and what the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East has also said—that unless the new Committee has the resources to carry out the kind of cross-cutting science inquiries that the present Committee undertakes, it will be a Select Committee in name only. That would be a betrayal of the work done before and a betrayal of all those people—the learned professors I mentioned, and indeed people in industry—who are so supportive of the Government's commitment to, and policy on, science.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman's sentiments and I have no vested interest, as I am no longer a member of the Science and Technology Committee. Aside from resources, what will be the terms of reference of the proposed Sub-Committee? Will it have the remit to look into science across all Departments, not just the main Department?

Mr. Willis: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. As I understand it, it will be for the new Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee—not the Government—to establish the Sub-Committee, and it will then be that Committee's job to establish its terms of reference and agree them with the House. It is important, in my view, that it should be called the Science and Technology Sub-Committee, and it is also important that it have free rein to go wherever it likes across Government wherever science is involved. It should be able to present reports to this House without fear or favour. In order for that to happen, it will need adequate resources.

I believe that there is huge support for cross-cutting science and technology in this House. I hope that the Leader of the House has heard the calls, and that she will respond positively to them.

7.11 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): Motion 6, in part at least, will put in place the departmental Select Committees to mirror the new Departments. That is an eminently sensible and quite necessary process, which ought to be without issue. However, two changes cause my hon. Friends and me some concern.

The first issue concerns the size of the Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, which effectively replaces the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. Innovation has been removed, but it has been replaced with regulatory reform. My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mr. Weir), who sat on the old DTI Committee, has looked into the matter and estimated the volume of work. He sees the work load as broadly similar, so it seems odd to us that the size of the Committee should be reduced from 14 members to 11.

Secondly, on a related point, all Select Committees must, so far as possible, reflect opinion throughout the House; they must secure a correct level of departmental scrutiny, with questions from all parties reflecting all opinions within the Chamber. It is likely, however, that if the reduction of the new Committee from 14 members to 11 is allowed to proceed, the Scottish National party would lose its only place on a departmental Select Committee. It would leave the joint SNP-Plaid Cymru group with only one departmental Select Committee place—on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. *[Interruption.]* Notwithstanding some of the more partisan comments, surely as Leader of the House the right hon. and learned Lady must understand that if we are to have proper scrutiny, particularly of the important role of business, enterprise and regulatory reform in a growing economy, questioning must come from people of all parties expressing all opinions.

It is unlikely that the right hon. and learned Lady will be prepared tonight to overturn the decision to reduce the size of this new Committee. However, we hope that she will be able to give a commitment to review the work load of the Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee over the next year or so to determine whether a membership of 11 is appropriate or whether it should be increased. We also recognise that she is not the person to appoint or make recommendations for appointments to any Committee—nor should she be—but we hope that in her summing up she will reflect on the need for Select Committees to reflect accurately and properly the full range of opinions in this House. She should provide us with some comfort on that and she

should understand the necessity for minority party opinion and voices, particularly on the key Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Committee.

7.14 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I shall confine my remarks to a narrow area: motion 7 on the modernisation of the House. The Deputy Chief Whip of the Labour party—a member of the Government, effectively—has tabled the motion:

"That Mr Jack Straw and Paddy Tipping be discharged from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and Ms Harriet Harman"—

a Cabinet Minister—

"and Chris Bryant be added."

He is, of course, a Parliamentary Private Secretary. There is no doubt that the right hon. and learned Lady is a well-qualified individual. I know that it is not her being an old Pauline that makes her well qualified; it is that she is a Minister, has had experience and has had a connection with civil liberties. All those factors commend themselves to me. However—I guess she expected me to say "however"—the Committee is now merely the mechanism by which the Executive control the House of Commons. All the reports on the workings of the House of Commons have usurped the role of the Procedure Committee. We have reports on the guillotine, or what we grandly call in Standing Orders "Timetables". In fact, pages 59 to 72 are given over to the way in which the Executive control the detail of the examination of Bills—one of the most important tasks that the House performs.

I shall give the example of what I think a Leader of the House should be. In the years that I have been here, the most remarkable Leader of the House has been the right hon. John Biffen, now Lord Biffen. I say that because the tides of Executive ambition come across the House from time to time. The idea of a business committee and timetabling, which in our experience turned out to be the guillotining of Bills, was on the agenda. On 27 February 1986, when such motions were before the House, the then Leader of the House, Mr. Biffen, said:

"If I were concerned solely with the volume and dispatch of Government business, I would welcome such pervasive timetabling as is now suggested.

The House will be disposed to assume that the proposed arrangements will be operated in good faith and without an eye to party advantage. That may well be so, but I think I am entitled to observe that the"

proposed

"Legislative Business Committee would have a Government majority, and that if the Government did not like any proposed timetable, it could be voted down or amended on the Floor of the House.

On balance therefore, I think that the Government"—

this is the Leader of the House speaking as the Leader of the House—

"would be advantaged by the Procedure Committee proposals. All Governments are tomorrow's possible Opposition, and I think that my right hon. and hon. Friends, in their moments of supreme confidence, should consider, at least theoretically, how these proposals would bear upon the Opposition.

The Westminster political process is oblique and wide-ranging. It is like a seamless robe, which includes Government legislation, and much else. At present, the Opposition have open-ended opportunities for time and debate on legislation. If these are automatically extinguished, the Opposition will be deprived of a pressure point which is often used to secure accommodation from the Government, not merely on legislation, but on other points in the political process."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 1986; Vol. 92, c. 1088.]

That is why John Biffen was a remarkable Leader of the House.

The House had a genuinely free vote. We have to remember that Mrs. Thatcher was Prime Minister. I think that the current Leader of the House was in the House. Mr. Speaker was in the House. The leader of the Scottish Parliament or Prime Minister of Scotland, the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), was in the House, as were some Liberal Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton)—who was formerly a distinguished Chairman of the Procedure Committee—and a couple of bonny Members present who represent Glasgow constituencies. What have we reduced ourselves to when we no longer think that this House can aspire to have as its leader someone who realises that there is a delicate balance to strike? That is what this debate is really about.

The proposition before us is that the current Leader of the House should be made a member of a Select Committee. She asserted in an earlier debate that that was a matter of custom, but it is certainly not a matter for Standing Orders. The Modernisation Committee was designed for a purpose, but what I have witnessed over the past 10 years is the almost total seizure of all procedural matters relating to the conduct of business in this House. The Government will always win, because they are a Government by virtue of having a majority; the majoritarian principle prevails, so they will get their way. That is why the Leader of the House is the most important intermediary in terms of the fairness of the balance of debate.

I am anxious about another Parliamentary Private Secretary being placed on the Committee, because it is packed with such Members. Its members include former deputy Chief Whips, a Liberal Democrat Whip and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who is currently sitting on the Opposition Front Bench. I almost feel that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield—the former Procedure Committee Chairman—and I are the only Back Benchers serving on it. Few of the new intake have any memory of what the House of Commons should aspire to be. We talk much about returning the balance of power to the House of Commons; the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) mentioned that. However, unless we have a Leader of the House who is prepared to take a bigger view, we will be as we are now: reduced.

I have explained why I oppose the motion, but I wish to ask a further question that it does not address: do we need the Modernisation Committee in its current form? Functions such as what office accommodation we should have and how to achieve proper representation more easily should be separated from procedural matters that inform Standing Orders. We saw what happened today. A Cabinet Minister, with the support of a Government majority, swept aside the proper process for appointing Members to serve on a Select Committee. That was said to be necessary for a variety of reasons. People can read *Hansard* and decide whether they share my judgment on that or agree with the Leader of the House. It is not right that we have cast into the hands of the Leader of the House,

[Mr. Richard Shepherd]

through the mechanism of a Committee that already has so many Parliamentary Private Secretaries on it—*[Interruption.]* In answer to that, I say that the Chancellor of the Exchequer's PPS is on it, for instance. We are discussing whether the Government control it. Whips are members of it. It is not a Committee of Back Benchers that can look with objective separation at what is appropriate for the House. Let me give an example.

The Leader of the House's predecessor—who now has another Government job as Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor—said when he was Chairman of the Committee, "There is no point in going down that route because the Whips will not accept it." That is what we who serve on the Modernisation Committee now have to suffer. I know of no other Committee where the Chairman would say, "We can't say this, because the Whips will not accept it." Taking that route would kill whatever worth the Select Committee system has. However, it is not only the previous Leader of the House who took that view—it has been characteristic of the whole process and progress of the Committee.

I commend to the House the democracy commission of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). Through it, he proposes that these two Committees—the ancient and important Select Committee on Procedure, and the Modernisation Committee—should be merged and under the chairmanship of an Opposition Member. He does so because there must be a certain detachment in the assessment of what is appropriate for the House.

I know that my objections and arguments will be brushed aside. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] There you have it, but this House is nothing unless it can control more of its business. The Prime Minister asserts, and I actually believe him, that that is what he wants—that we play a more meaningful role in the dispensation of power within the matters that fall to us. I therefore urge Members, for what it is worth, to think seriously on this, for there is one compelling reason why the present nomination is wrong. Among all the credits to her name, the Leader of the House is also chairman of the Labour party. I cannot think of a more partisan role, of necessity, and of a more blatant example of how the Government control this Chamber.

7.26 pm

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). Whatever Members on the Government Benches might think of what he has said, historically and by pedigree he has shown himself to be totally committed to this House, to proper debate and to the rights of Back Benchers in all parts of the House. I personally salute him for the work that he has done over all the years that he has been here.

I am delighted, too, that my hon. Friend quoted John Biffen, who was an inspirational and dedicated Leader of the House—a man who led the House without too much party politics not only at business questions, but at other times. I make a plea to the current Leader of the House that the party political content on the Floor of the House be kept to a minimum. While she has a prime duty to ensure that the Government get their business, her other duty is clearly to represent the best interests of the House as a whole.

The omen for the House of what happened in the earlier debate, on which there was a vote, is not good. Unfortunately, and despite not only my pleadings but those of a Member of the House who is highly respected in all parts of it—my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young)—the Leader of the House, who could have withdrawn that motion, chose not to do so. I regret that. As a result, the omens for fairness and even-handedness do not herald well for Members in all parts of the House, particularly Opposition Members.

I also support the view expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills that at some future stage, the Modernisation Committee should be merged with the Procedure Committee. We are talking now about the appointment of two people, one of whom will, in due course, be elected as Chairman of the Modernisation Committee. It is a very powerful Committee and it seems utterly wrong that it should be dominated by one party. That is why I question the appointment of a PPS as well as the Leader of the House. Unfortunately, a PPS cannot be objective. He or she cannot adopt an independent view separate from that of his or her Minister. Therefore, the two are tied together inextricably. Clearly the Committee will suffer as a result. Members are appointed to a Select Committee not just for their party view, but to take an objective view. The discussion of modernisation should have nothing directly to do with party politics: it should have everything to do with the convenience of this House and its ability to do its job of holding the Government to account and scrutinising legislation.

I have had the pleasure of serving on the Modernisation Committee since it was set up by the new Labour Government in the autumn of 1997 and I have served under several Leaders of the House. One of the most inspirational and exciting to work with was the late Robin Cook. He was committed to the House and to returning independence and integrity to it. He suffered a major setback when the Committee's proposals on the appointment procedure for Select Committees—unanimously agreed by that Committee under his chairmanship—were defeated by the Government. Although it was supposedly a free vote, there were Government Whips outside the Lobbies saying, "Vote this way, this is the Labour Lobby." I hugely admired Robin Cook for his principles and almost unlimited ability, but he was disappointed and depressed that a proposal that would have improved the independence and integrity of the House, by getting on to Select Committees those people who had an interest in that Committee, the ability to do the job, and the knowledge and experience to serve it—and by extension the House—well, had been defeated.

I shall not vote against the motion. As I have said, I have spoken with the Leader of the House and I say to her, not in a patronising way, that she will have to show the House and the members of the Committee that she can be entirely impartial in seeking to serve the interests of the House as it holds the Government—

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I shall give way to the hon. Lady, whom I also admire for her courage and, occasionally, her aggression. There will come a time, perhaps in the not too distant future, when she and her colleagues will be on the Opposition side of the House. Then they will have a slightly different perspective on what the Modernisation Committee is doing and the ability of Opposition Members and parties to hold the Government to account.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I personally think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) will make an excellent Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. I also personally believe that my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will be adornments of the Modernisation Committee. However, as someone who has served in the House both in opposition and in government, it concerns me that we are losing sight of the fact that the Committees are Committees of the House. I am concerned by the increasingly naked direction by Whips of who should chair them. The point is that the Committees are supposed to choose their own Chairs. The people whom we have put forward are wonderful and brilliant, but some of us remember when the assumption was that Select Committees represented the whole House and were able to appoint their own chairs.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: Of course, Select Committees are able to appoint their own Chairmen. I speak from experience: when the remits for social services and health were divided up between two Select Committees, my previous work on health meant that I was not put up by my party for the post of Chairman of the Health Committee. However, with the support of the Labour and Ulster Unionist parties, and with my own vote, I did manage to achieve that post.

Like other parties, however, mine is inclined to get its way in the long term. After the 1992 election, I applied to be reappointed to the Health Committee, and I am confident that I would have been elected its Chairman, but my party did not nominate me. It invented a new rule that was no rule at all. It was a rule for the Conservative party, but not for the Labour party. That has nothing to do with this House, but the people responsible were made to look very foolish. For my part, as one door closed, another opened, but we need a Select Committee system that genuinely represents the interests of the House.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, the previous Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, who remains a nominal member, often said that he could not take a proposal to the Government because the Whips would not accept it. That is an example of a Select Committee Chairman who is a Cabinet Minister and who openly admits that certain proposals that the Committee would like to make to the House cannot be got through the Government Whips and the Cabinet. That means that the Committee in question could not be truly independent.

I hope that similar problems will not arise when the present Leader of the House is Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, as she has a duty to both House and Committee as a whole. The fact that the Whips might not like a proposal is no reason why it should not form part of a report that can be debated by the House and responded to by the Government.

The late Robin Cook was a very distinguished Chairman of the Modernisation Committee, but I repeat that he was ultimately torpedoed by his party's Whips. That tragedy is an example of the sort of thing that my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills is very aware of. We believe that the Modernisation Committee should be led by a Chairman with integrity. He or she must be prepared to take forward proposals that would benefit the House as a whole.

The Leader of the House knows that I support the creation of a business committee that would give Back Benchers more say about how the House of Commons uses its time. We are not just lackeys of the Executive. We are here to do a job using our knowledge and experience and we should represent our country and our constituents, as the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington does so well.

I tell the Leader of the House that my priorities are the interests of my country, the interests of my constituents and, only third, the interests of my party. If more Members of the House had those priorities, in that order, turnout at elections would be much greater, respect for politicians would be much greater and people would have greater respect for Parliament.

As I said, I shall not vote against the motion because I trust the right hon. and learned Lady. We have spoken and she knows my priorities in the House. I hope we can work together to improve Parliament, not only for parliamentarians but for the people we represent.

7.40 pm

Ms Harman: The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) was concerned that a Science and Technology Sub-Committee might not have membership of the Liaison Committee and would thus not be able to put questions to the Prime Minister and others who appeared before the Committee. That situation would be addressed if the Chair of the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee was also the Chair of the Sub-Committee.

Mrs. May: The right hon. and learned Lady slightly misunderstood what I said. My point was not about the Liaison Committee but about the new arrangements that will enable questions to be asked of the Chairmen of Select Committees—one of the issues examined by the Modernisation Committee. It was in that context that I was considering the possibility that the Science and Technology Sub-Committee might not be given the opportunities it would have had if it had continued to be a full Committee.

Ms Harman: I thank the right hon. Lady for her clarification of that point.

I understand the concern of Members about Parliamentary Private Secretaries, but they are not members of the Government. The previous Government did the same as we do. PPSs do not sit on Committees covering the Departments in which they are PPSs.

The right hon. Lady asked about Europe. The system of European Standing Committees is of interest to a number of Members. The Government are still considering their position on how the system of scrutiny for EU matters can best be developed.

John Bercow: The right hon. and learned Lady tells the House that Parliamentary Private Secretaries are not members of the Government. Will she confirm that it is the normal expectation that when Parliamentary Private Secretaries vote, they will vote with the Government?

Ms Harman: The normal expectation is that all Labour Members of Parliament will vote with the Government.

As I said, we shall continue to look at the question of proper scrutiny of European legislation. The question of regional scrutiny was raised.

Simon Hughes: May I make a small point? The right hon. and learned Lady said that the Government's current plan is for Parliamentary Private Secretaries not to sit on the Committee relating to the Department where they are a PPS. The exception to that is of course her hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is her PPS and is proposed for membership of the Modernisation Committee, which is one of her responsibilities.

Ms Harman: Indeed. That situation is different for a number of reasons that I mentioned in my opening comments and to which I shall return briefly.

We are committed to greater accountability for the regions of England, and the Government are giving further consideration to the proposals for regional scrutiny and will report back to the House.

I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on the Science and Technology Committee. They are absolutely right: the volume and quality of that work must continue. The number of members on the Sub-Committee that is to be constituted is a matter for the Committee. If the Committee wants it to, the Sub-Committee will have a strong remit to turn over stones—as has been said—and to look into nooks and crannies.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) mentioned parliamentary scrutiny of machinery of Government changes. Obviously, the machinery of Government is ultimately a matter for the Prime Minister and one would not want Departments to be in abeyance while there were long discussions, but the hon. Gentleman's point is worth considering. Ministers from different Departments, when dealing with science issues, as well as other stakeholders, could be called to give evidence to any Sub-Committee that deals with science and technology.

The hon. Member for Dundee, East (Stewart Hosie) raised the issue of the smaller parties. He has discussed that with the usual channels, and I will ensure that I raise the issues that he has raised in the House today.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The right hon. and learned Lady will have to do a little bit better than that. If we lose the place on the new Committee, the Scottish National party will lose 100 per cent. of its places on departmental Select Committees and SNP-Plaid Cymru will lose 50 per cent. Although she cannot determine the membership of Committees, she can say that there will be a Labour majority and that Conservative Members will serve on the new Committee. However, she has to make a real commitment to say that we will maintain our place on departmental Select Committees.

Ms Harman: That is not for me to say at this point. There will be further discussion about the membership of Select Committees when they are reconstituted.

I am left with responding to the points made by the hon. Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) and for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton). The hon. Member for Macclesfield is clearly frustrated and feels that more progress should have been made on the Modernisation Committee, but a great deal has been done by that Committee in the past 10 years. If he thinks back to when the Modernisation Committee was formed, he will realise that many innovations have strengthened the role of the House, as a result of that Committee's work and his work on it. Clearly, he is frustrated in that he wants it to do more, and I look forward to working with him to ensure that it does so. However, I ask him not to lose sight of the good work that has been undertaken already.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, it is important that we do not lull ourselves into the belief that there was a golden age. I know what it is like to be in opposition. I was in opposition for 15 years, under Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and when I sat where the hon. Gentleman sits now, I did not think that that was the golden age of parliamentary democracy. He might remember that his Government often crushed him, as well as the Opposition, even when he was sometimes right and agreed with us. It is important that none of us thinks that there was a golden age then.

Mr. Shepherd: I was not trying to score a point across the House; I was trying to point out what was the role of a Leader of the House and I was citing John Biffen in that example. The right hon. and learned Lady may well have been in the Chamber when he made that speech. That was the traditional view of how the role was conducted. Indeed, I spoke up from the Government Benches, just as Government Members still occasionally speak up for the needs of opposition. The role is particularly important because of the minority parties. Their very argument shows the right hon. and learned Lady's duty. I was merely citing the John Biffen example, and if she can follow that route, I will give a cheer.

Ms Harman: I was a Member when John Biffen was Leader of the House. If the hon. Gentleman cares to look at this week's issue of *The House Magazine*, he will see that, when I was asked which Leader of the House I would model myself on, I mentioned John Biffen. So I well remember that time, but I also remember his not succeeding in the face of his Government riding roughshod over his attempts to strengthen the House.

I do not think that the hon. Member for Macclesfield should consider the Modernisation Committee as being packed; it works by consensus. Do the Modernisation Committee members feel that they have not been able to achieve what the Modernisation Committee wants to achieve because the Committee is packed? It has made progress—more progress than, unfortunately, John Biffen, however good his intentions, made in his day.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The point about the Leader of the House having special responsibilities is surely well made. At various times Select Committee arrangements have, in effect, broken down—as when there was an attempt to deprive the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) of the Chair of the Health Committee. Chairs of Committees, as proposed by the usual channels, have been overturned by the House. Usually things come to a crisis because the Leader of the House at the time is not able to reflect the whole balance of the House. The procedures are very open to challenge—as the right hon. and learned Lady well knows. Every single change to a Select Committee could be debated on the Floor of the House. We could go on for an interminable time unless the Leader of the House is sensitive to a number of points that are being made.

Ms Harman: Indeed, and I take the right hon. Gentleman's point.

I join hon. Members who have paid tribute to Robin Cook. I was deputy to Robin Cook for many years when we were in opposition. He, too, was a Cabinet member and a Leader of the House. Like me, he was a committed member of the Labour party, who believed, as I do, that the Government should be held to account. It is in that spirit that I hope to serve on the Modernisation Committee and continue my work as Leader of the House.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 248, Noes 25.

Division No. 202] **[7.51 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, Danny
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clelland, Mr. David
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, John
Hemming, John
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, rh Keith
Holmes, Paul
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, David
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Hughes, Simon
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hunter, Mark
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lamb, Norman
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Lepper, David
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Prentice, Bridget
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, Mr. Alan
Reid, rh John
Robertson, John
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, John

Smith, Sir Robert
Snelgrove, Anne
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wills, Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Liz Blackman and Mr. Alan Campbell

NOES

Bercow, John
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Dorries, Mrs. Nadine
Field, Mr. Mark
Greening, Justine
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Hosie, Stewart
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Price, Adam
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Robertson, Angus
Rosindell, Andrew
Salmond, rh Mr. Alex
Selous, Andrew
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Spink, Bob
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wilshire, Mr. David
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas

Tellers for the Noes:
Pete Wishart and Hywel Williams

Question accordingly agreed to.

MODERNISATION OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That Mr Jack Straw and Paddy Tipping be discharged from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and Ms Harriet Harman and Chris Bryant be added.—*[Claire Ward.]*

Draft Legislative Programme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Alan Campbell.]*

8.4 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): We now debate the Government's draft legislative programme—the list of Bills that we are considering for the next Session. The Prime Minister has said that he wants to see, as part of his constitutional reform agenda, stronger accountability of the Government to Parliament and greater engagement between Parliament and the people. The change in the way that we plan to announce our legislative programme marks a step forward in those respects. Here in Parliament we spend most of our time legislating, so it is right that Parliament should have early sight of the Government's thinking on what we will be asking it to consider. That will allow hon. Members to look at the overall shape of our programme before it is set in stone and will help members of the public and interested parties to give their views to hon. Members. This debate is to enable hon. Members to give their preliminary views on the draft legislative programme, which has been sent to all hon. Members and is on the Government's websites.

Officially, the contents of our legislative programme have always remained secret until the Queen's Speech at the state opening of Parliament. However, because of the necessary discussion that has to go on between Government Departments and stakeholders, information does of course get into the public domain, but it does so in the worst way—unofficially and piecemeal. Lobbying firms and political consultancies get paid millions of pounds to guess for their clients what is likely to be in the Queen's Speech. However, while bits and pieces are glimpsed unofficially, the work of the Government in putting together their legislative programme has hitherto gone on behind closed doors, with no one outside Government able to see the overview of the legislative programme as a whole until the whole thing is ready to steam ahead into Parliament. Those outside, because they have not been allowed to know before the Queen's Speech what the Government are doing, cannot have sensible discussions with the Government. This time last year, I knew that the draft coroners Bill was not in the legislative programme. Those concerned—coroners, organisations of bereaved relatives, and lawyers who specialise in inquest work—were lobbying for changes to the Bill. They would have been better off lobbying for the Bill to be in the legislative programme, but I could not tell them that what mattered at that stage was not some amendments but the fact that it was not even in the programme. It makes sense for people to be able to see the work that is under way in Government before it is set in tablets of stone. This does not in any way change the state opening, the Queen's Speech and the role of Her Majesty the Queen in setting out the Government's concluded plans for the Session.

The publication of our draft programme builds on a number of steps that we have taken to improve the ability of this House to scrutinise legislation. We already publish some Bills in draft. To date, we have published 58 Bills in draft since 1997. During this Session we published four bills in draft: the regulatory

enforcement and sanctions Bill, the human tissue and embryos Bill, the climate change Bill and the local transport Bill. I recognise that we would all like to see more Bills published in draft. During the next Session, we intend to publish in draft an equalities Bill, a marine Bill, a heritage protection Bill and a cultural property and armed conflicts Bill.

I can announce today that following the publication of the draft Coroners Bill and its plain English translation, I have asked parliamentary counsel to produce alongside the draft marine Bill a plain language version in time for its introduction. It is my intention that in publishing our draft programme, we should work towards publishing at least one plain language version per Session.

There has also been the Public Bill Committee procedure which, during the current Session, has meant that Government Bills starting in the Commons after Christmas have been subject to additional scrutiny. The UK Borders Bill and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill have been considered in this way. From the start of the next Session, all Government Bills starting in the Commons will be subject to this procedure, which, by the taking of oral and written evidence from Ministers and other interested parties, as with the Select Committee process, means that there is more extensive scrutiny.

David Wright (Telford) (Lab): I very much welcome the Government's move to increase scrutiny prior to the publication of Bills and draft Bills. Would my right hon. and learned Friend consider opportunities to lay out at an early point the amount of time each Bill will take during a Session, and how much time will be made available on the Floor of the House? In particular, could we consider opportunities to have two-day debates for the Second Reading of Bills, particularly for important ones?

Ms Harman: The Modernisation Committee has considered the amount of time available for Back Benchers when important Bills are introduced, and one of the proposals under consideration is the limitation of Front Bench speeches, so I shall move on quickly with the rest of my comments.

The draft legislative programme before the House is not, of course, the final programme. There will be further careful consideration of the Bills that should form part of our legislative programme both by the Cabinet Committee and by Cabinet. It is always possible that new priorities will emerge, and it is always possible that some Bills will not get to the finishing line because there are problems with the policy or the cost. Constraints of parliamentary time mean that the Government are limited to about 28 Bills per Session, so some will have to wait for the next one. If a Bill is not in the draft programme, that does not mean it is a dead duck. It may still come forward either as a gap emerges in the current programme, or in the next programme.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I have listened carefully to the right hon. and learned Lady's answer to the hon. Member for Telford (David Wright), and to what she has said since, and I hoped that she would be able to give a commitment to the principle that two days would be given to Second Reading of some important Bills, and that more time should be given to Report and Third Reading on some occasions—a point raised by the Modernisation Committee. Report stage in particular should be given this time because it is an opportunity for Back Benchers who do not serve on a Bill's Committee to raise issues in the House.

Ms Harman: As the right hon. Lady knows, it is important for us to see whether we can give enough time on the Floor of the House to Bills that a number of hon. Members want to speak about. From time to time, that has been done, but I understand that there are proposals that the process should be more systematic and routine. Obviously, those will have to be considered.

I said that if a Bill is not in the draft programme, that does not mean that it will not come forward in the future, and nor does the draft legislative programme substitute for, or cut across, more detailed consultations on Bills that will be led by the Departments concerned. I am a firm believer that the more open the debate, the better the final outcome, and it is in that spirit that we have published the draft legislative programme.

I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for agreeing to undertake detailed scrutiny of this legislative programme. I and the Secretary of State for Justice are to give evidence to it in October. There will be public consultation meetings in each region, facilitated by the Government office in the region, and the Cabinet Office will co-ordinate that consultation process.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): If consultation is to be meaningful and not thought to be a gimmick—I welcome the idea of that—will the Leader of the House undertake to ensure that a summary of consultation results will be available to colleagues, and that the consultation will end in sufficient time for it to be able to influence the outcome? People would know that the consultation would end by the first week in October, or something, we would see the results, and there would be a real dialogue with the Government in the month running up to the Queen's Speech.

Ms Harman: Of course we will publish the results of the consultation. Next year, one of the things we should do is start this process earlier, but it started under the new Prime Minister, so there is not as much time for people to consider the draft legislative programme as there will be next year. This is a truncated version of the process; I hope that hon. Members will bear with us and recognise that.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): In the other nations of the UK, where there are no regional offices, will the Scotland Office, Wales Office and Northern Ireland Office ensure similar consultation?

Ms Harman: I am sure that that will be the case. Our officials have liaised with officials in the devolved Administrations and I have discussed the process with the First Ministers in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

[Ms Harman]

Having set out the reasons behind, and the process of publishing, our draft legislative programme, I will deal with its content. I do that simply by reminding the House of the Prime Minister's words on 11 July. He said that the programme seeks to

"respond to the rising aspirations of the British people"

by delivering

"new and better opportunities in education, employment and the provision of housing and health care,"

and ensuring

"that in a fast-changing world there is opportunity and security not just for some people, but for all the British people."—[*Official Report*, 11 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1449.]

There will be an education and skills Bill to enable all young people to stay in education or training till 18. There will be a new pensions Bill to ensure that all working people have the right to a workplace pension, with a duty on every employer to contribute towards it. There will be a new housing and regeneration Bill, which will help put affordable housing within the reach of those who cannot afford to buy or rent.

The planning reform Bill will implement the Eddington and Barker reports. The climate change Bill will introduce a legal framework for reducing carbon emissions in each five-year period to 2050.

There will be a health and social care Bill to create a stronger health and social care regulator and ensure better access for patients to clean and safe services. There will be Bills on children in care, and the Government have already introduced the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill for carry-over into the next Session. The unclaimed assets Bill will allow money in dormant bank accounts to go towards improving our country's youth and community facilities.

The regulatory enforcement and sanctions Bill will support business by keeping regulation of compliant businesses to a minimum, while targeting and penalising those that deliberately disregard the law. The employment simplification Bill will deliver simpler and fairer enforcement of the national minimum wage.

Protecting the security and safety of the British people is paramount for every Government, so we have introduced the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, which will be carried over into the next Session, and we stand ready to include provisions that come from the review of policing by Sir Ronald Flanagan.

Many of the proposals that the Prime Minister set out to the House in his speech on the governance of Britain will be included in a constitutional reform Bill.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for her generosity in giving way to me a second time. Several Bills that she mentioned will have financial provisions. Last week, the Government exercised parliamentary privilege and prevented the other place from debating amendments to the Pensions Bill, claiming that they were financial provisions and should not be debated again in the Lords. They could not therefore be brought back to the Chamber. Will the right hon. and learned Lady set out her definition of a money Bill as opposed to a Bill with financial provisions?

Ms Harman: I will write to the right hon. Lady and refer her to the precedents that exist. I expect her to ensure, as I will, that we sustain and defend the supremacy of this House.

Hon. Members have read the proposed legislative programme in our Green Paper, so I will say no more about the detail but give them the opportunity to present their views in the debate. I look forward to hearing hon. Members' views on not only the content but the process.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I want to ask about the constitutional reform Bill and its relationship with other measures. Many of us welcome its proposed provisions, not only those to rebalance the relationship between Parliament and the Executive, but those on devolution to the regions. However, the devolution mechanisms in the Bill and the people power elements in, for example, the housing and regeneration Bill, should be tied together in the consultations that will take place in the regions. If reform is perceived as a dry constitutional matter, it will not fire people with the enthusiasm that it would engender if the two measures were related in the consultation.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend is right. However, I emphasise that, this time round, it will not be a Rolls-Royce process of consultation because we are starting late. We are simply putting a window on the front of Government activities. A great deal of activity goes on in preparing and planning the legislative programme. That is important in the context of what the House ultimately has to consider in the Government's proposed legislation. For the first time, people will be able to see the process before it is set in tablets of stone.

8.20 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I welcome the opportunity for the House to debate the draft legislative programme. I also welcome the fact that the right hon. and learned Lady listened to hon. Members' concerns and staged this debate separately from tomorrow's summer recess Adjournment debate. As she mentioned, the publication of the draft legislative programme was one of the proposals contained in the Prime Minister's statement on "The Governance of Britain", which also leads to the constitutional reform Bill.

I wish that I could welcome the Prime Minister's new-found commitment to Parliament. If only it were genuine! Much has been made of his determination to make statements to the House before briefing the media. When he made his statement on the constitution to the House, everyone was impressed that he had not gone on the "Today" programme to talk about it there first. After the previous Prime Minister, who was so obsessed with spin, here was a new Prime Minister who put Parliament first—at least, so said his spin doctors.

The Prime Minister's statement included proposals to allow Parliament to vote on whether we go to war, to request the dissolution and recall of Parliament, to ratify international treaties, and to scrutinise public appointments, as well as proposals to remove the prime ministerial power to appoint bishops. That was in the statement made on 3 July, but on 2 July *The Daily Telegraph* reported:

"Gordon Brown will this week propose...giving up royal prerogatives traditionally exercised by the prime minister, such as the power to declare war without parliamentary approval or to

appoint bishops to the Church of England. The House of Commons will be given new powers, including the right for MPs to recall Parliament during a recess if there is a national emergency, to hold American-style confirmation hearings…and to ratify international treaties."

I imagine *The Daily Telegraph* just made five lucky guesses. The same must be true of *The Independent*'s coverage of the right to trigger legislation by petition on 28 February, *The Guardian*'s prediction of citizens' juries on 27 February and the predictions by *The Times* of a new ministerial code on 16 May and of a new Bill of Rights on 1 July. Before I talk about the draft legislative programme, I want to make one thing clear. All the bluster about announcing things to Parliament first was just that: bluster. There is already a whole list of examples of how the Prime Minister has treated Parliament and hon. Members with disdain.

The Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, promised in the previous Queen's Speech, will have its Second Reading in October, just a couple of weeks before the end of the Session. It is going to be a carry-over Bill, but the carry-over procedure was introduced for Bills that had nearly completed their parliamentary stages, not Bills at the very beginning. The Prime Minister has twice reversed policy—first on casinos, secondly on cannabis—in response to planted questions during Prime Minister's questions rather than in an oral statement, which would have given hon. Members the chance to ask questions of the Minister concerned. The Prime Minister has since insinuated to a press conference—not to Parliament—that he might reverse the liberalisation of licensing laws. Those proposals are not in the draft legislative programme.

As we discussed in a previous debate this evening, the Prime Minister has also confirmed that Parliamentary Private Secretaries will sit on Select Committees. They might not be formal members of the Government, but they work for Ministers. That is a conflict of interest, but the Prime Minister has ignored it. As I mentioned in my intervention on the right hon. and learned Lady, the Prime Minister also opted to use parliamentary privilege to override the other place, after it voted for a lifeboat fund to compensate properly the 125,000 people who have lost their pension savings. If the Prime Minister trusts Parliament, why has he completely ignored the wishes of the other place?

The Prime Minister is also ready to sign the latest EU treaty, as he made clear in Prime Minister's questions today, which would subjugate the Westminster Parliament to the institutions of the European Union. The conclusions of the previous European Council state:

"National parliaments shall contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union".

The Prime Minister, who supposedly believes in the sovereignty of Parliament, is therefore happy to sign a treaty that places upon Parliament an obligation to do whatever the European Court of Justice decides is for the "good functioning" of the European Union. No, the Prime Minister does not believe in putting Parliament first.

In relation to the proposed legislation in the draft legislative agenda, I said earlier that we had heard most of the statement on the constitution in the media before the Prime Minister made his statement. That was down to spin. However, we had heard most of the draft Queen's Speech many times over, throughout the Prime Minister's career. That was down to his failure to deliver. So why should people believe that he is going to deliver now, after all this time?

Furthermore, why should we believe that the Government will deliver what is in this legislative programme when they have failed to deliver several Bills in their previous legislative programme? According to the Leader of the House's website, the following Government Bills for 2006-07 have not yet had their First Reading: the Climate Change Bill, the counter-terrorism Bill, the protection of cultural property during armed conflict Bill, the House of Lords Bill, the Human Tissues and Embryos Bill, the local government regulation office Bill, the party funding Bill and the road transport Bill.

Three of those Bills are actually in this draft legislative programme, but that should not be a surprise, because every single one of the 23 Bills proposed in the Prime Minister's statement has been announced before. For the information of hon. Members, and for the record, here are the relevant dates: the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill, December 2006; the children in care Bill, June 2007; the Climate Change Bill, March 2007; the constitutional reform Bill, July 2007; the Coroners Bill, June 2006; the counter-terrorism Bill, June 2007; the criminal justice Bill, July 2006; the Crossrail Bill, February 2005; the education and skills Bill, March 2007; the employment simplification Bill, March 2007; the energy Bill, May 2007; the European Communities (Finance) Bill, June 2007; the health and social care Bill, February 2007; the housing and regeneration Bill, March 2004; the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill, December 2006; the Local Transport Bill, May 2007; the national insurance contributions Bill, March 2007; the pensions Bill, May 2006; the planning reform Bill, May 2007; the planning gain supplement Bill, March 2007; the regulatory enforcement and sanctions Bill, May 2007; the sale of student loans Bill, March 2007; and the unclaimed assets Bill, May 2005. A total of 23 bills, and not a single one of them is new.

Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister said that he wanted more houses to be built. But he has said that before. He once said:

"What would a Labour Government do today? We will get Britain building homes again".

That was in 1994. Three weeks ago, he said that he wanted to develop long-term fixed-rate mortgages. But he has said that before, too. He once said that he wanted to

"develop a market for long-term fixed rate mortgages—something that is important to the UK".—[*Official Report*, 9 April 2003; Vol. 403, c. 279.]

That was in 2003. Three weeks ago, he said that he wanted to develop eco-towns, but he has said that before. His Housing Minister once said that the Government would

"create small scale eco-community developments rather than individual homes".

That was in 2006.

Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister said that he wanted to use unclaimed assets to spend on youth and community centres, but he has said that before, too. He once said:

"Today I can announce an agreement with the banks and building societies that unclaimed assets held in bank accounts will be put to use to improve youth and community facilities".—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2005; Vol. 440, c. 613.]

[Mrs. Theresa May]

That was in 2005. Three weeks ago, he said that he wanted to raise the school leaving age. But he has said that before. He once said:

"New proposals—universal education after sixteen".

That was in 1996.

So I do not know how the Prime Minister can claim that he is some kind of a new start. He is not a new start; he is a broken old record. And talking of records, the Prime Minister has missed this opportunity to put right his record. On his watch, 125,000 people have lost their pension savings. Where is the legislation to compensate them properly? On his watch, home ownership started to fall for the first time since records began. So why will people trust him to deliver more housing? On his watch, the number of young people not in education, employment or training has passed 1 million. So why will people trust him to create opportunities for young people? On his watch, the NHS has been plunged into deficit and forced to make swingeing cuts. Where is the action to stop the cuts? Where is the Bill to increase NHS autonomy and accountability? On his watch, violent prisoners have been released because there is not enough space for them in jail. Where is the legislation to ensure that criminals get what they deserve?

In 2004, the Government committed themselves to introducing a marine Bill. The 2005 Labour manifesto, on which the right hon. and learned Lady was elected, promised to introduce a marine Bill during this Parliament. Where is it? And what about women? Only last week, the right hon. and learned Lady came to the House to make a particularly vacuous statement on her agenda for women, yet there is nothing in this legislative programme specifically for women. Where is the action on equal pay? Where is the action on human trafficking? Where is the help for the families who use a relative or neighbour to care for a child?

As the legislative programme is rolled out, there will be Bills that we support and, where we do, we will engage constructively with Ministers. Indeed, we encouraged the Government to introduce a climate change Bill and I am pleased to see that they are doing so. As another example, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition made clear today, we will work with the Prime Minister in making the country more secure against terrorists.

On the whole, however, the draft Queen's Speech is a massive disappointment. The public wanted a change from the Blair years, but this legislative programme is not the answer to the country's needs, because this Prime Minister is not the answer to the country's needs, because he is not the change that the people want. He is not a change. His disdain for Parliament, his lack of new ideas, his spin and stealth are no change. It is just the same old Labour.

8.30 pm

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East) (Lab): I shall be brief. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on a unique parliamentary occasion: a discussion of the draft legislative programme. In the past, the programme has remained the preserve of a few people in the higher echelons of Government, but now the entire House has the opportunity to participate in it. Whatever disagreements hon. Members have with the programme, the fact that we can debate it here is a very welcome step forward indeed. I believe that most Members agree with it.

There is a great deal in the programme, but I shall mention three Bills that I believe will impact on my constituency and on others. Few Members, councillors or elected officials can help feeling a sense of hopelessness and anger when constituents approach them about problems with public transport services within their communities. I believe that the problem is particularly acute for Members who represent areas that are geographically isolated and have statistically low car usage. No one disagrees that bus operators should be able to make a profit, but we must ensure that they continue to provide an essential public service. They receive a substantial public subsidy, and with that should go a clear responsibility to ensure an effective public service. I hope that the draft Bill will have real teeth for elected local authorities to ensure effective public transport in their communities.

Members often present petitions before the House and we sometimes meet the managing directors of our bus companies. Occasionally, we have a little bit of success, but there is a major problem, as everyone's postbag over the last few months will confirm. When these problems are compounded, they can lead to genuine hardship and isolation. It is often the elderly, and, indeed, the young, trying to take advantage of employment opportunities, who live in these isolated areas and experience transport problems. I believe that the Local Transport Bill will be widely welcomed in the House and outside in the wider community.

Secondly, I would mention the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill. Much attention will rightly be focused on the question of child maintenance, but I shall make particular mention of the other payments side of it. The Bill includes a commitment to set up a scheme for lump-sum compensation for people suffering from asbestos-related diseases.

My constituency used to have a chemical works, owned by Turner and Newall, which made asbestos products for 80 years. The consequences were dire not just for the work force, but for their families as well. My grandfather worked there after he left the services after the first world war and my own aunt has asbestos-related disease. She has it because my grandmother washed my grandfather's overalls. That shows how insidious this disease is and how much hardship it creates. As I said, it is not just those workers who are affected, but their families and others who worked in shipyards, plumbing and a range of other industries.

It is brave and honourable to recognise what happened there. The people who suffer from this disease have pretty dreadful lives, with all the disadvantage and pain that goes with it. This lump-sum compensation may make a little bit of difference to however many years these people have left. The Government are acting wholly honourably by including this measure in the next legislative programme.

Finally, the education and skills Bill is more important than any other Bill for securing long-term economic prosperity and success for this nation. It offers an

opportunity for a national crusade to engrain in the nation's psyche the importance of the skills and education agenda.

The impact of globalisation hits us all. Seven years ago, a group of women workers in my constituency who were in textiles and made garments for Marks and Spencer lost their jobs. Marks and Spencer made the commercial decision to source those goods from the far east and China. The argument then was all about low wages and low skills, and how we could compete with them. Over the next three years, by 2010, China will produce more PhDs than the whole of the United States. The argument is no longer about trying to compete on low wages and skills; it is about competing on skills alone. We need Ministers to sell the Bill. I hope that whatever specific disagreements we might have on different sides of the Chamber, we can have a form of national unity on the importance of developing the skills agenda.

I recently took part in a "state of the city" debate in the city that I represent—Sunderland. I was asked a question by a member of our local Youth Parliament: what sort of jobs did I think they, as young people, would have in 30 years' time? The question made me think. It was very perceptive. I thought about what the economy was like when I left school just over 30 years ago in my constituency and what we thought about the future. The economy was dominated by mining, shipbuilding and heavy and light engineering. That is what we did. In many ways, we thought that it would go on.

If I had predicted 30 years ago that we would lose shipbuilding, mining and other industries, while at the same time predicting that employment levels would be higher, people would not have believed it. If I had predicted that in 30 years' time my local area would produce 380,000 cars a year—remember the state of the British car industry and its reputation in the 1970s—and that some would be exported to Japan, not many people would have believed it. I would not have believed it. Yet that has been the pace of change in the past 30 years. Although it is difficult to predict the future, we can say that whatever the pace of change has been in the past 30 years, the pace of change in the next decade will be as quick.

David Wright: Does my hon. Friend agree that small and medium-sized enterprises will be crucial in the crusade to upskill people in the UK economy? A key aspect of the Bill needs to be to provide support to small and medium-sized enterprises so that they can give young people time off to take advantage of training opportunities. That is crucial. I hope he agrees that we need a strong commitment to that. We need to ensure that we check up on employers to ensure that they are giving that time to young people in particular.

Mr. Kemp: I certainly agree. When I talk to employers in the constituency, particularly in small and medium-sized firms, the one thing they constantly say is, "We need a work force that has constantly improving skills and levels of education." Employers recognise that if they are to be competitive within a global economy, they need a highly skilled work force. They realise that it is in their interests, to their benefit and for the profitability of their companies to ensure that we have that level of skills. Young people certainly need it.

I wanted to mention only those three Bills. We should grasp the challenges of the future. We have lived through a period of change over the past 30 years, but the speed of change will quicken in the future. The train is leaving the station and we have a choice: either we can get on it or it will leave us behind. It is crucial that education and skills are taken seriously. We must get out there and sell that message. We must convince everyone—young people who have not yet entered the job market and those who are already in work. Adaptability—the ability to change jobs—is important. The tradition of being in the same employment for many years will disappear. Only if we sell education and skills and convince people that they are important will we have a reasonable chance of securing this country's long-term economic future.

8.40 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): We welcome the opportunity to discuss the programme for the coming year. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) said on 11 July when the Prime Minister made his statement, it is right that we should move from legislation being cooked up in secret and announced on one day with a fanfare of trumpets—albeit that it had usually been leaked beforehand, with everyone pretending one thing was happening when it was not—to a system of honest and open discussion in which the Government say at the outset, "This is what we are thinking," and at the end say, "This is our final view." That is a much better process. We welcome it, and will co-operate on it.

We also welcome the honesty of the Leader of the House. This parliamentary year will operate from the arrival of the new Prime Minister at the end of June, so time is inevitably foreshortened. We understand and accept that. However, I made the point in an intervention that that should not mean that consultations should not be considered, and it will not be helpful if ideas are not taken on board. Flexibility will be required, as will hard work in October by civil servants and others employed in Departments, and Ministers must be honest about any good ideas that are suggested. We look forward to that.

My position and that of my fellow Liberal Democrat Members can be summarised by saying—*[Interruption.]* Although none of them is present, as I have been their colleague for so many weeks, months and years, they trust me to speak for them. Our position is that Governments have often legislated in haste and introduced measures that we subsequently regret. Legislation, legislation, legislation is no substitute for good administration, but it has often been used as a substitute for it.

I checked up on three Departments. In the past 10 years, we have had 11 Health Bills, four Health White Papers and seven Health Green Papers. We have had 11 Education Bills, nine Education White Papers and 11 Green Papers. We have also had 60 Home Office Bills. Much of that proposed legislation has not been thought through; much of it has been undone, as the Government have returned and said, "We want to change it"; and much of it has never been implemented—we pass it, but it never takes effect. My strongest plea to the Leader of the House and her colleagues is, please do not introduce

[Simon Hughes]

any Bill that we do not absolutely need. Legislation should be the last resort, not the first resort. Usually, what is needed is administration—not new laws, but other steps.

As the Leader of the House knows, one of the results of all the laws we have passed is that there are more than 3,000 new offences. That is not a healthy route to go down. The test I always apply is whether legislation increases liberty or authority. We have experienced 10 years in which the trend has been towards authority—by and large, although not without exception—and away from liberty. We need the trend to be in the other direction.

My second test is whether legislation increases individual people's power and local power, rather than central power. There have been some very centralising proposals. The national health service is still one of the most centralised services in the world, and real devolution to local people and communities is desperately needed. One of the measures by which we will judge any legislative proposal is whether it gives local government a real opportunity to be influential and powerful—as opposed to its being said that something will happen but its not being the case. The same test applies to the devolved Administrations. The Government need to understand that in devolving government to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, they must actually devolve it. There are bits that they still hang on to, and so far they have not been willing to go down the road of a federal United Kingdom in which its four countries can have real autonomy in many of their own affairs.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a very interesting point that fits in with much of what the Government have said in the past few weeks about transparency and opening matters up. How far would his party go in devolving more power? How far would he go down the route of fiscal autonomy? Would he support a call from other parties for the devolution of corporation tax to the devolved Administrations?

Simon Hughes: The honest answer is that we want to go much further. At our autumn party conference, we will debate a proposal for the same form of constitutional convention for the UK as in Scotland—involving not just politicians but business, the unions and faith groups, among others—so that we can achieve such devolution. That would include thinking through the financial settlement across the United Kingdom. If one believes in a federal United Kingdom, as I have all my years, that must be the consequence.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is on to an interesting train of thought. Given that the Scottish Parliament was established by a referendum, does he think that that proposal, once thought through, would have to be put to a referendum of the Scottish people?

Simon Hughes: I have a very clear view about that, too, which is that if a constitutional convention for the United Kingdom comes up with proposed changes to the constitutional structure of the relationship between the four countries—including, in my view, the way in which we elect our Parliament and what we do in this building—then, yes, that needs to be endorsed by a vote not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom. One clearly cannot alter the constitutional relationship in a big way without that change. That is why we supported, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, what *happened after the constitutional conventions* in Scotland, and in Wales and Northern Ireland when they moved, with the assent of their populations, to that conclusion.

On the constitutional reform Bill, the Government need to go further. So far, we have seen proposals for a welcome transfer of powers, but as our previous debates have indicated, there is still a lot further to go. Pursuant to the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) and others, I hope that we will see the day when the business of Parliament is fixed by Parliament in consultation with Government, not by Government in consultation with Parliament. The agenda should be set here—it should of course accommodate what the Government came to power to implement—rather than the Government by grace and favour allowing Parliament opportunities to do other things.

I observe that in the list of the other 22 Bills, the Government have made provision literally from the cradle to the grave. Indeed, in the words of a joke one might think of, they have made provision from the womb to the tomb. There is a Human Tissue and Embryos Bill at one end of the life cycle and a coroners Bill at the other, so all the seven stages of man—and woman—are catered for. To that extent, the list is certainly comprehensive. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made the good point, however, that none of this is new. I will not repeat the litany that she gave, but it is absolutely true that if ever we wanted evidence that this is a continuing Government, not a new one—with a Prime Minister who, although a new individual, is continuing the agenda—the evidence is here in front of us.

I want to pick out one or two important implications. There are five Bills relating to the children, young people and education agenda, which is important. I share the view expressed a moment ago by the hon. Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) that unless we have a child maintenance and other payments system that means that parents pay what they are meant to pay, all the shouting over the past 10 years about the Child Support Agency will have been in vain. That system has failed, and it needs to work. We all have constituents who are the victims of the system not working.

Children in care, which is still a hugely important issue, is also on the agenda. Ministers will know that many of the people who end up in prison have been in care at some stage in their lives; there is a sad link. Many people are still waiting for adoption. We do not have adequate fostering or enough people to foster. We need to ensure that those children who, through no fault of their own, end up in care get a much better quality of care, so that the risk that they will go wrong later in life is much reduced.

In relation to education and skills, the borough that the Leader of the House and I represent—like the area represented by the hon. Member for Houghton and Washington, East—had a tradition, certainly on its

northern side, of people working in the docks, but the docks are no longer there and the education needs have changed. However, I hope that we do not go blindly in the direction of academic education for everyone until the age of 18. Many of my constituents want vocational education, and they can benefit from experience of the workplace at the top end of primary school. They benefit from doing paid work at weekends when they are in their middle years of secondary school. They want to be able to understand the world of work, and some of them have never had the experience of anybody in their home working. It is therefore important that education and skills are not seen as being solely about academic attainment. We need skills upgrades, but we also need to train people for practical things, such as constructing buildings so that we do not have to import people—as London is doing now—to do it. We could use our own young people to do the construction work not only for the Olympics, but all ove. Britain.

I know that the Leader of the House has always been vocal about youth services and I am glad that the Government have been able to find more money for youth services through the unclaimed assets Bill. We will have to check whether it is entirely compatible with human rights legislation, given that someone else left that money in the bank, but we need more investment in youth services. Everybody now recognises that, and if the Bill is a quick-fix way to do that, in partnership with local communities, it will be a good thing to do.

On housing and planning, there will be three Bills. One is, sadly, insufficient and the other two on planning are controversial. On the Housing and Regeneration Bill, we do not yet see the mechanisms for delivering the social housing, at a cost people can afford, to rescue Britain from the shortage of housing, terrible debts, high mortgages and crippling rents outside the social housing sector. My borough is not untypical and we have waiting lists of thousands for social housing. We had a statement on housing the other day and there was an almost deafening silence from Ministers on council housing, which appears to be still off the agenda. Many people believe that council housing is a good thing. Many people like living in council housing and believe that councils can be more responsive than housing associations, housing trusts, arm's length management organisations or tenant management organisations. I hope that the Government have heard the message loud and clear from authorities and parties around the country that what is now called the fourth option—the right of councils to say, as mine is doing, that they will not sell off their housing stock or set up an ALMO—should be an option for every council, certainly in England.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is giving a considered view of housing policy, but I can tell him that as far as the vast majority of the parliamentary Labour party is concerned, council housing is back on the agenda. I have a question for him. What will he do to stop Liberal Democrat councillors running opportunistic campaigns against housing schemes wherever they are suggested?

Simon Hughes: I believe in devolution, and local people have to judge what is appropriate for their area. It is not for us in the centre to say what is right for Reading, Washington or Maidenhead. It is a matter for community debate and decision. It is necessary to respond to needs, but they differ around the country. Decisions on how to meet need—be it through council housing or selling off housing stock—should be taken locally, without force or bribery. The Labour party conference has made it clear that it wants councils to be able to build and let housing. The Leader of the House is also deputy leader of the Labour party and she knows that too, but my point is that we did not hear much about that we when had exchanges on the subject here the other day. I want to make sure that the matter is kept on the agenda. We will not let up on our efforts to make sure that it is, and I hope that colleagues on the Labour Back Benches will do the same.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) (Lab): If we are to permit local councils to construct homes again, and if we are to provide the resources for them to do so, would the hon. Gentleman concede that there should be some sort of quality test on their ability to perform that function adequately? My instinct is very strongly in favour of what my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) has said, but we have an obligation to prevent councils that have struggled with their existing management function from extending their housing stock.

Simon Hughes: We certainly do not want to build poor-quality housing, and the old Parker Morris standards were good. I applaud the fact that the Government want a decent homes initiative to make sure that standards are upgraded, and I am not arguing that councils should build frequently and build cheap. On the contrary, I am arguing that they should build to last, and the really good housing that people like to live in is housing that is built to last. We must adopt that approach again.

I absolutely understand that we must not compromise on standards, but the big question is whether there is a real commitment to putting in the finance and giving councils the power of general competence. That freedom would mean that they are not told what to do by central Government.

Mr. Todd: I think that the hon. Gentleman may have misunderstood my question, which was whether he thought that some sort of quality test should be applied to a council's governance and management of housing, and to its ability to provide decent housing stock. However, I accept everything that he said about the stock itself.

Simon Hughes: I am sorry: I did hear that question, but did not deal with it. In the end, the quality test is applied by the electorate, with the help of the district auditor and all the performance standards tests for local government that are now carried out regularly. Much better peer-group analysis is available, but the quality test that the hon. Gentleman seeks comes when local people decide whether their council is good or bad, and whether it is run well or badly.

I turn now to the planning gain supplement Bill and the planning reform Bill. The idea that big planning decisions will be taken by a quango and not by accountable councils or Ministers is not one that I favour. The quango can advise, if that is what the Government

[Simon Hughes]

want, but big planning decisions must come with political accountability and they cannot be taken out of the political forum.

In addition, the current system works well. The proposal means that large portions of the planning gain money—section 106 money—can be hoovered to central Government for redistribution. That is very problematic and, although the Prime Minister has said that it is to go out for consultation, I hope that the Bill that is eventually considered by this House will contain a different approach that respects local autonomy.

Martin Salter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again, but I want to press him on this matter. Some major strategic decisions have to be made. They may involve airports, or ports, or even the third Thames bridge for the Reading area that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and I have advocated tirelessly. However, it is the devil's own job to get four or five councils to agree to do anything in a strategic way. Does he accept that sometimes, and for the good of a region, central Government must take the tough decisions?

Simon Hughes: That is exactly what I was arguing. The summary of the Government's draft legislative programme states that the purpose of the planning reform Bill is to

"Streamline and improve planning including introducing a single consents regime for major infrastructure projects, establishing an independent infrastructure planning commission".

That is a quango, not a Minister. I am in favour of big schemes being decided by Ministers. Yesterday, for example, the Secretary of State for Transport gave her approval to Thameslink. I do not like some of the implications for my patch, but I can have a go at her, question her and call her to account. We need to have that sort of system for planning.

On local transport, we are concerned that the Government are forcing local councils to run road pricing pilots as a sort of bribe to get the schemes that they want, whereas we believe that a national pricing scheme would be a better way forward. We would also like a national pricing scheme to be introduced for lorries. Other countries operate that system, and it seems to work well.

Moreover, greater powers over bus regulation must have the local accountability for which the hon. Member for Houghton and Washington, East called. That is not as huge an issue in London as it is in rural and suburban Britain. Public services may be contracted out to private, tenderers, but they must be subject to democracy. For that to work, we need an accountability that really works, rather than leaving everyone involved to say, "Nothing to do with me, guv."

On work and pensions, there is a proposal for an employment simplification Bill. In parenthesis, I welcome simpler text in legislation and I seriously hope that eventually all Bills will be readable and understandable by the public. As Ministers know, in Committee, I regularly make the plea that Bills be written in a logical order, so that definitions are not followed by the substance; the Bill should start with a statement of what it is about and then amplify it. The issue is serious. If what we do is to be understood, Bills should not be readable only by lawyers who are paid to do the job.

On employment simplification, there is one grievance that I hope will be addressed. At present, someone with an exemplary record—perhaps for 25 years—can be summarily dismissed after one breach of good conduct, which does not have to be violence or dishonesty. We need to consider restoring a yellow and red card system in employment that does not give such great powers to employers.

I could highlight many of the proposals, but my final selection is the measure on health and social care provision. I welcome the general proposals to integrate the various regulatory and supervisory bodies. My constituency experience, like that of other Members, is that in this rich country we do not yet provide an adequate standard of care for our old and our vulnerable. Too often, the local and national press describe how people are abused and exploited. We need well-qualified staff, effective regulation and effective action when things go wrong, so that there are not repeated occasions when we say, "Oh that was terrible, those people were treated so badly."

Today, there were statements about counter-terrorism and emergency powers and I shall not repeat our arguments about them. The draft legislation process is a good one and we shall take part in it constructively, but the test of whether it enhances the credibility of the Government and Parliament is whether the Government listen, respond and, to return to my starting point, legislate only when nothing else will do—when the general mood in the House is that legislation is the right way to proceed after showing us the draft, listening to our answers and eventually agreeing the best and shortest text.

9.2 pm

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, welcome the fact that we are having this debate on the Government's draft programme, not just because it gives Back-Bench MPs and even the tiniest of minority Opposition parties a chance to comment on the Government's proposals, but also because, as we have heard, it allows the public to be involved in the process. My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House will understand from my earlier intervention how keen I am to ensure that consultation takes place in all the nations of the UK.

The announcement of the draft programme is also welcome because it deals with one of the most striking anomalies in our constitution, whereby every year the monarch is made to read a speech that she has not written, and with which she may disagree heartily, and has to pretend that it is her programme, which she is bringing as a surprise to Parliament. We all know that is not the reality, so the announcement of the draft programme makes it clear that political responsibility for the programme lies with the Government, while recognising the monarch's role as Head of State in the formal ceremony. It is a welcome element of modernisation in our proceedings at Westminster.

I shall speak briefly about four specific aspects of the measures outlined in the draft programme. I hope the Government will take my comments on board. The first issue is housing, on which the draft programme makes a number of legislative proposals, reflecting the commitment made by the new Prime Minister to meet

housing need, especially for first-time buyers. That is particularly important in many parts of the country, not least in my constituency.

Housing legislation is, as it should be, devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but decisions at UK level can have as important an impact on housing provision in Scotland as in England or Wales. If changes were made to VAT and stamp duty—I have no idea whether that is in anyone's mind—such matters would certainly be decided at UK level. The Government's welcome proposals to encourage more long-term fixed-rate mortgages would benefit house buyers in all parts of the UK. Similarly, the proposals to make Government land available for housing also have relevance for Scotland, particularly given the opportunities for the development of Ministry of Defence property.

Mr. Todd: I wonder whether my hon. Friend noted in the smaller print a reference to dealing with Travellers' housing needs. I hope that any such Bill will attempt to provide greater certainty both in the planning of appropriate sites for Travellers to occupy and to develop for their own housing purposes, and in greater guidance on the role of local authorities in providing accommodation and sites for them in the future. Certainty has been lost through past legislative decisions made by the Conservative party.

Mark Lazarowicz: I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will have heard what my hon. Friend has just said and will take on board his helpful comments.

The Government have announced proposals that will have beneficial consequences for housing provision in Scotland, as well as in the rest of the UK. There are other ways in which the UK Government can help my constituents and people elsewhere in Scotland to get on to the housing ladder, not least by using the influence that the Government have with the big banks and financial institutions to find funds at favourable rates to build new houses for first-time buyers and affordable housing. A lot can by done by the financial institutions themselves—for example, by promoting shared equity, which can certainly be encouraged in Scotland, as much as elsewhere in the UK, by the Government's actions.

I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity when she replies to the debate to make it clear that the Government's decision, and the Prime Minister's announcement, that they will make housing a top priority applies to the whole UK, not just to England and Wales. I want the Government and the Scottish Executive to work together constructively to ensure that housing is a priority throughout all the nations of the UK.

I hope that the Scottish Executive will make as radical a commitment to affordable housing in areas such as mine in Edinburgh as the UK Government have made for England. I also hope that the Scottish Executive will take advantage of the new measures announced by the UK Government, to which I have just referred, to ensure that my constituents can benefit from the same type of ambitious programme that I am pleased to say the Government have announced for the rest of the UK.

Mention was also made by colleagues in the earlier discussions of the planning gain proposals in the draft programme. Again, as my hon. Friend the Minister will know, that legislation will be taken forward on a UK basis. There is some debate in England and Wales about the degree to which the funds raised by the planning gain supplement, if it is introduced, will be applied locally, as opposed to centrally. It is clear that, in England at least, by far the biggest proportion of any funds raised under the planning gain supplement will be spent locally to provide for local housing and infrastructure needs.

Although things may have moved forward, the proposals last year provided that in Scotland, the funds would be allocated directly to the Scottish Executive, with no provision to allocate them to the areas in which they were raised. When we have an Administration in Scotland who have proposed lots of spending plans without the means of paying for them, we have an Administration who are certainly very ready to take any extra finances made available to them, although those finances would be raised from local communities. I hope that a similar commitment to ensure that funds raised from local communities will be applied for their benefit will apply to Scotland as well. I hope that that Minister will take on board that point in the discussions on the planning gain supplement proposal.

Stewart Hosie: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman may not be aware that when we debated the matter previously I opposed the planning gain supplement process for Scotland, precisely because every penny went to the Scottish Government and not one penny was guaranteed to return to the locales from which it came—as he wants it to. I am sure that—given that the First Minister is present—the Scottish Government will take on board everything that the hon. Gentleman is saying, but having a little dig like that, when he is unfamiliar with the arguments that have been made in the House previously, was slightly inappropriate.

Mark Lazarowicz: I am very much aware of the arguments that were made in the House. In fact, I think—although my recollection may be wrong—that I was in the House for that debate at the same time as the hon. Gentleman. I think that we might even have intervened on each other. At this stage I do not want to argue for or against the planning gain supplement. I just want to make sure that the same principle as will apply in England—that the purpose of any planning gain tax is to assist local communities to develop their infrastructure—will also apply in Scotland. If the intervention from the hon. Gentleman, who seemed to be getting the endorsement of the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), means that that is also the policy of the Scottish Executive, I welcome that commitment and I am sure that colleagues in Scotland will take that on board in debates in the Scottish Parliament.

Flooding is an issue that has been at the forefront of all our minds over the last few days. The flooding reminds us that new housing has to take account of changes in the environment and should be constructed so as to ensure that it is energy-efficient and that the building sector can contribute to the reduction of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions.

That brings me to another issue: energy consumption by households and fuel poverty—an issue of particular relevance to parts of the UK where the

[Mark Lazarowicz]

climate is not always as warm as it is elsewhere. Whatever else happens, it is likely that energy prices are, in the long run, going to continue to go up—as a result of market trends and perhaps also of packages of measures designed to encourage reduced energy use. We all know that for some householders, rises in energy prices have led to more fuel poverty. Although there has been a drop in energy prices this year, the overall trend in energy prices has been, and will no doubt continue to be, upwards.

The Government have done a lot to tackle fuel poverty, but it is essential that vulnerable consumers are protected against the effects of the increases, both through financial measures and by helping to make their homes more energy-efficient. In the energy White Paper, the Government said, in effect, that they expected energy companies to do more to protect vulnerable consumers and that if they did not, the Government would consider making them do so by bringing forward legislation—for example, to promote the wider use of social tariffs by energy companies.

Some energy companies have risen to the challenge of recognising the social needs of more vulnerable consumers, but not all have done so. I hope that when the Government come to assess the degree to which the energy companies as a whole have responded to the call set out in the energy White Paper, they will decide whether there is a case for introducing in the energy Bill that we are promised later in the year proposals to ensure that all energy companies meet the needs of consumers who have suffered from the effects of rising energy prices.

I want to turn to two other areas of policy related to the environment. I was delighted to understand from the comments made by the Leader of the House that the marine Bill will be brought forward in draft form as part of the legislative programme. A long-running campaign, launched by WWF in particular, has had a lot of support. It highlights the fact that both wildlife and our citizens rely on a healthy and productive marine environment for their future well-being. There is a need for marine legislation. I know that marine legislation is a complex area, and the UK Government and the devolved Administrations have important issues to resolve between themselves, but I hope that draft legislation is brought forward at an early stage, so that the definitive Bill can be introduced soon after that.

Another environmental issue that is moving higher and higher up the political agenda is the Government's proposal for a Climate Change Bill. I am glad that it has been confirmed that the Bill will be in next year's legislative programme, and I hope that it will be brought forward at an early date. The Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill had a thorough discussion on the proposals in the draft Bill. My hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House and I have been members of the Committee, so she knows that there has been thorough consultation, and because of that, there is an opportunity to bring forward the Bill at an early stage; I hope that that will happen.

When the Joint Committee examined the draft Bill, two things came home to me: first, I realised the overwhelming importance of taking action, and secondly I realised how pioneering the Bill is. In the Committee's public sessions, comments from people in China, California and the European Union made it clear that our Climate Change Bill is likely to encourage other countries to follow suit. The Bill is a good example of the Government showing real international leadership, and I certainly welcome that. That is why I hope that the Bill will be introduced at an early stage in the Government's programme for the coming year.

The Joint Committee's public discussions underlined how potentially radical the draft Bill is as a driver for influencing and changing Government policy, and ensuring action across all areas of Government to make sure that we really succeed in cutting greenhouse gas emissions in this country. Even now, I am not sure whether everyone who supported the introduction of the Bill realises its potential power; it is an important measure. All credit should go to Friends of the Earth, Christian Aid and the other organisations that campaigned last year for Bill to be introduced. The Bill could be a powerful driver of change to Government policy and to the way in which we organise government and society. It is important to underline that it is not just the Bill that should be brought forward at an early date; the climate change committee envisaged in the draft Bill should be established as early as possible, too.

As well as undertaking an important advisory role, the climate change committee will need to help to make the case for the radical measures that will undoubtedly be necessary if we are to meet the objectives of the Climate Change Bill. I hope that that committee will be set up quickly once the Bill becomes law, and I hope that the shadow committee, which the previous Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggested would be set up soon, will be established very quickly. It would be helpful if my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House gave some indication, today or later, of the possible timetable for the establishment of that shadow committee.

In the coming year, I would like the Government to make sure that the objective of tackling climate change is a theme that is reflected not just in the Climate Change Bill, important though that is, but throughout the entire legislative programme, the entire Queen's Speech, and everything that the Government do. That needs to be done, because the challenge of climate change not only requires action across Government, but requires us to send a message that it is a theme running through all that the Government do. We need to send the public the clear message that we politicians are serious when we say that tackling climate change is a top priority. That is essential, because we all know that tackling climate change requires action not just by Governments—both ours and those of other countries—but by individuals. If we are to persuade the public to make their own personal contribution to tackling climate change, we have to show them that we parliamentarians, and the Government, mean what we say when we bring forward our policies, legislation and measures.

9.19 pm

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz). I shall focus my remarks tonight on issues that will be of particular concern to more than half the population—to women.

It is thoroughly timely that the House should have the opportunity, thanks to the legislative programme, to review the arrangements for assisted reproduction and embryo research. That opportunity will be provided by the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill. That is good news. There will be different opinions, as properly there should be, and those opinions should be given expression in the debates in the House.

I make no secret of the fact that I have always been on the side of what I call the progressives, in the sense that I reject the notion of a doctrinal opposition to embryo research. I take a pragmatic view, an instrumental view, an empiricist view, that if benefits can flow from such research, the effect of which can be to mitigate the effects of congenital diseases or disorders or to remove them altogether, we should welcome that. In the deliberations that lie ahead on the Bill, I hope that the Government and right hon. and hon. Members will be significantly influenced and informed in their consideration by the body of expert scientific and in some cases medical evidence that will be presented.

However, it is an open secret that there are many people who believe that the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill is an appropriate vehicle for another review by the House—a review of the law relating to abortion. I am not a lawyer—I say that as a matter of some considerable pride—and I am certainly not a Government lawyer, but my understanding is that the Government lawyers have advised Ministers that they would not be able safely to resist amendments on the subject of abortion in the context of the Bill. To seek to remove them or prevent their discussion or debate on grounds of scope would almost certainly fail in legal terms.

I have heard it floated that the Government are prepared to consider such matters, and that they recognise that legally they would not be able, in parliamentary terms, to resist the discussion of such matters. What I have not heard is a confirmation of that highly salient point on the Floor of the House. If the Leader of the House—or the Deputy Leader of the House—can confirm when she winds up the debate, that what I have read in the popular prints is correct, I would greatly welcome that. There are differences of opinion on the matter, but it is right that if there is a legislative vehicle in the programme, an opportunity to consider these issues should be provided.

For my own part, I believe that the vast disparity in the availability of abortion services across the country between one area and another is a source of concern and an occasion for protest. In the latest year for which reliable figures are available, 2001, there appears to have been something of a lottery in terms both of the funding of abortion and of the waiting times to secure it. In 2001 in Coventry, 96 per cent. of abortions were funded by the national health service—lucky people in need of or making a request for an abortion in that part of the west midlands. If, however, a woman were so relatively unfortunate as to live in Kingston or Richmond, the chance of securing a publicly funded abortion in that year would have been only 50 per cent.

If we are to have a national health service, despite the avowed religion of localism that seems too frequently to be professed by members of all parties these days, I hope it would be conceded and, indeed, proudly proclaimed that there should be a commonality of provision across the country. Either we believe in the availability of an abortion service to women, on certain terms and conditions, or we do not. If we believe in it, as I confess that I passionately do and always have done, these marked differences—this postcode lottery, in effect—should not exist. I want that state of affairs to change.

I referred to the differential in funding, but there are also marked differences in how long people have to wait to secure an abortion. In 2001, someone who lived in north-east Lincolnshire might be quite impressed by the figures, because in that part of the country 79 per cent. of abortions were undertaken before 10 weeks had elapsed, whereas someone who lived in Great Yarmouth might be considerably disappointed, not to say horrified, by the fact that the figure was as low as 26 per cent. That simply is not right. We must make a public policy judgment in this House of Commons as to what we think appropriate.

I am not, as the House will be relieved to learn and you will be pleased to discover, Mr. Deputy Speaker, inclined to dilate tonight on all the issues relating to the potential amendment of the law on abortion. That titillating opportunity will doubtless present itself at a later stage in the course of the consideration of the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill. I would, however, like to say something specifically about a crucial challenge for the Government and the House concerning early abortion.

The vast majority of abortions in this country are, and should be, undertaken early, but we need to do a great deal more to improve access to early and safe abortion for women who have decided that that is what they want. I put it to the Leader of the House and the Deputy Leader of the House that it is vital, in terms of the scope of the Bill and the time allowed for debate on potential amendments when it is forthcoming, that we should have a chance to consider all the germane issues.

For example, I cannot for the life of me see any justification, in 2007, for the arcane—dare I say it, almost antediluvian—requirement that a woman who seeks an abortion should have to obtain the signatures of two doctors. That might sound like a prosaic requirement that can be easily fulfilled, but that is often not so. Doctors will sometimes say, "No, you'd better go elsewhere; it's not convenient for me to see you at the moment," or "There's quite a long waiting list in this area." All sorts of difficulties can arise. If the basic will of Parliament is that women should be able to access abortion, they should not be put in the invidious position of having to traipse around, possibly in a condition of considerable personal and even physical distress, to access what should be their legal entitlement and what is certainly—I believe that right hon. and hon. Members would judge—their moral due. The "two doctors" requirement should be removed, and we should at least have a chance to table, debate and vote on an amendment to that effect when the legislation is considered.

Similarly, there should not be long delays. If we are to have targets in other fields, why not in this case? I would suggest a target of 72 hours from the time that the woman makes the approach to request the abortion to the time that the procedure is undertaken. At the very least, it should not be more than a week. We

[John Bercow]

should not in a modern, decent, civilised democratic society entertain the idea that women faced with a very difficult situation, and possibly having to make a harrowing decision, should then have to wait for week after week, and possibly longer, before they can give effect to the decision that they have made perfectly properly, honourably and in all good conscience.

There are other oddities about the current fusty law, one of which is the requirement that the procedure take place in rather prescriptively specified locations. I believe that modern law should be rather more flexible than that. The principle that should govern the amendment of the law to localise provision and provide for a range of community settings in which abortion can take place should simply be this: clinical governance and quality assurance procedures should be comparable to those that apply to any other medical procedure that an individual might undertake within the national health service. I do not see why abortion should be set as a class apart—much more difficult to obtain than other operations and far more difficult to access, logistically or possibly even geographically.

Such considerations must be looked at in the context of the law, as should the suggestion, which I think is sound, that we widen the range of people who can undertake the procedure. I see no good reason why qualified nurses who are perfectly capable of undertaking the abortion procedure should not be empowered to do so in law.

Whatever hon. or right hon. Members listening to this debate think about my views on the subject, I hope that people feel it right that the House of Commons should consider such matters—a very long time after it last did so. I have been in the House since May 1997. To my knowledge, there have been no debates on substantive legislation on this subject during the 10 years and two months I have been here. There have been ten-minute rule motions put forward on the issue, but that is a wholly unsatisfactory basis on which to seek to determine the future of public policy on this subject.

I hope that the Government will be open-minded on the matter. They might not want to whip their own side; I rather imagine that on the Conservative Benches there will be a free vote. As far as I am concerned, all votes are free and I tend to do what I want anyway. I am not overly preoccupied with what any Whip might think about these matters. I hope, however, that there will be votes, and an opportunity for decent debate leading up to them.

Secondly, and very much more briefly, I did not expect a single equality Bill in the draft legislative programme, but I confess that I think that there is a compelling case for one. After all, we have had the discrimination law review, and we have a single equality body. Many people—not all—think that a logical corollary of the creation of a single equality body is the creation of a single equality Act, the purpose and effect of which would be to simplify, synthesise and distil all other anti-discrimination legislation into a single corpus of law that would be easier for citizens to access and more readily understandable by the public and private agencies responsible for adhering to it.

Simon Hughes: I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that we need to do much better at consolidating law, not just in the equality field. One of the remaining problems is that we do not have a codified system of laws, and often people have to look in lots of places in order to find information, whether it is about equality or any other range of similar issues.

John Bercow: The hon. Gentleman and I can join forces in a campaign for simplification. I say three cheers to that.

Let me make it clear that a duty on the private sector to attack the principal causes of the pay gap between men and women would be a good feature of the Bill for which I am calling. I have pontificated on that issue many a time and oft during the past few years in debates in Westminster Hall and in questions to the Minister for Women. A duty has been placed on public authorities, and that is important, but we cannot ignore the fact that there is persistent and, in some cases, severe discrimination in the private sector as well. Of course, we have to be careful not to overload the system, not to achieve a counter-productive result and not to frighten business, but if we know that there is serious discrimination, we have a responsibility to face up to it and be prepared to do something about it.

That discrimination takes several forms: in pay; on the ground of pregnancy; through occupational segregation; and—whether deliberate or inadvertent—against people who have caring responsibilities. The insertion in such a Bill of a positive duty on the private sector, suitably calibrated to take account of what private companies can bear in the short, medium and long term, would make a great deal of sense and create equality between the public and private sectors.

The final issue that I wish to consider—simplification—will again warm the cockles of the heart of the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes). The Government have championed their employment simplification Bill. My understanding is that at least part of its purpose is to bolster the machinery for enforcing the national minimum wage. I said at the outset that I wanted to focus on subjects of particular interest to women. Let us not forget that, in 2006, 870,000 women benefited from the increase in the national minimum wage. Nevertheless, it is striking and salutary that no fewer than 202,000 women did not get the national minimum wage to which they were entitled. That is profoundly unsatisfactory. It is not only unfair to those women but corrodes the principle of the rule of law and the effect of the will of Parliament. In 2004, approximately 1,798 cases demonstrated that people did not get their entitlement, but only 62 enforcement notices and no penalty notices were issued. It is important that several criteria be fulfilled if the employment simplification Bill is to deliver effectively for women.

First, we need to publicise much more widely people's exact entitlements. Many people, especially those who operate in the twilight zone of low-paid and high-pressure jobs, will not know what is their due. Secondly, there needs to be a much more proactive enforcement policy if people are to get their due rather than be denied it. Thirdly, we need a robust regime of penalties to discourage rogue employers and encourage good practice.

All the matters that I have mentioned are potentially valuable, on an industrial scale, to more than half the population of this country. I reserve judgment on the last item, because I do not know whether the employment simplification Bill will work as the Government intend, and as I hope that it would operate. If they take account of the sort of points that I am making, I hope that the measure will command support from all parties, because it would make a great difference to the lives of many highly vulnerable people in this country.

The three issues are important and I hope that they will be tackled to the benefit of the country.

9.38 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow). He is always eloquent and I concurred with much of what he said, especially about reproductive health.

It is a great privilege to speak in the debate. We are considering a welcome and positive process. I agree with the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) that it has the potential to be excellent and I hope that I can use it today, and in years to come, on behalf of my constituents.

I want to talk about three things. The first is the housing and regeneration Bill, about which I am especially excited because the pressure on housing in London is extreme and my borough is no exception. In Newham, housing benefit spending is currently £245 million a year. Nearly one third—£67 million—is spent on keeping homeless people in temporary accommodation. It will be a measure of our success when that is reduced through the provision of affordable housing.

The expansion of affordable housing will provide an opportunity for my local council—a good local council—to ensure that much-needed social homes are built. I further welcome the commitment to increase the provision of affordable housing in east London and the UK as a whole, to ensure that young people who are not fortunate enough to inherit property can afford to buy their first home. There are so many young people in my constituency who see homes priced out of their reach and for whom the opportunity to buy is a vague dream for some time in the future. I hope that adequate levels of social housing will also dampen down the inflationary tendencies that have, I fear, made London the European capital for housing inequality.

I remind the House that the waiting time in my area for a four-bedroom property is more than 13 years. There are families on waiting lists who will never receive that home, because they will have grown and family members will have flown before it becomes a possibility. Let us not misunderstand what that means to those families. They are often shunted from home to home, as the lease finishes. That means that they do not have the stability that comes from making a community where they live, and that the children might have to move schools or travel large distances, with long journey times, to get to school. That does not make for a community.

Moving home is also an expensive business, as many of us in the House know. When people are poor and in temporary accommodation, often paying their rent out of their wages, which do not meet those needs, the moving costs on top of that add costs, problems and stresses to families already under pressure. The waiting list in my community in 2006 was 29,574, which is equivalent to the entire population of San Marino—I thank my researchers for that one.

There is also something to be said for not putting all our faith in supply. I would certainly welcome measures, which might be under consideration, to cool the overheated buy-to-let market, which has helped both to ratchet up the cost of temporary accommodation, at such an extreme cost to the Exchequer, and to decrease the affordability of housing for ordinary working families, above all in the capital. That is without mentioning the concurrent social difficulties experienced through unsuitably located households in multiple occupancy. I come from an Olympic borough, where we now have a population of migrant workers, who often live in small homes, with many to a room. That is causing stresses in local communities, as buy-to-let properties are inhabited in such a highly multiple-occupancy fashion—if that makes sense and is good English.

I have lost count of the number of complaints from constituents about absentee landlords, which stems from the huge increase in buy-to-let properties in Newham over the past decade. The high cost of rents in the private rented sector and the resulting overcrowding of properties by tenants often compounds those problems. More importantly, in the long term it might prove difficult to maintain West Ham's strong sense of community cohesion, of which I am immensely proud. Although I accept that the private rented sector provides much-needed flexibility and choice for those who cannot purchase a home or do not wish to, I would welcome moves to ensure that our dream of building mixed sustainable communities is not hampered by the sheer extent of buy-to-let properties in particular areas.

With a significant prospect of housing gain as a consequence of the Olympics, my constituents need rock-solid assurances that our expectation of more affordable housing as a result of the regeneration of the Olympic boroughs meets the needs of the families currently on the waiting list. There is a real fear that the properties that will be built in Stratford and along the regeneration belt in the Lea valley will be one and two-bedroom properties, which will not meet the needs of our growing families, particularly those who have been waiting on the housing list for more than 13 years for a four-bedroom property in the area.

A second theme of great importance for the people in my local community relates to the proposed counter-terrorism Bill, which includes a number of new proposals aimed at tackling the continuing threat from criminals bent on causing indiscriminate damage and death. When we strive to engage our communities in tackling this threat, however, it is vital that a meaningful consultation be undertaken in all our communities on proposals such as stop and question, and the extension of the limit of detention without charge, to ensure that alienation and disillusionment are not the unintended result of such moves.

The wonderfully diverse communities of West Ham want to work together to defeat this threat and to contribute constructively towards its defeat. They will therefore strongly welcome the consultation on the new security and anti-terrorism measures, and it is my

[Lyn Brown]

genuine belief that, through honest and open consultation on the legislation, we can help to avoid community isolation and alienation and build stronger cohesive communities in the UK. I am sure that the many diverse communities in my constituency will be keen to play as constructive a role as possible in this important debate, and I welcome the Government's decision to give them the opportunity to do so.

My third theme, like the others, seeks to strengthen the sustainability of the communities in my constituency. The Green Paper, "In work, better off: next steps to full employment", has already appeared and attracted some comment. I applaud the commitment to encourage long-term benefit claimants to sustain and make progress in employment, particularly through strengthening the skills base of people who have not worked for some time. Despite recent falls in the probability of leaving work, lone parents are still almost twice as likely as non-lone parents to leave their jobs. One in five lone parents who leave income support return to it within six months, and more than a quarter do so within a year. One third do so within two years, and almost two fifths within three years.

I fear that one of the reasons for that is that, when women are encouraged to go into work, the costs that they will face—including travel and child care costs—along with the reduction in their benefits are not properly assessed before they make the move. I have conducted a focus group—for want of a better term—with local communities on these issues, and it has become clear that, when women leave employment in those circumstances, they feel demoralised because they have not been able to sustain a job. That is bad enough, but they also leave with heavy debts. They have often been forced out of employment because they could no longer afford to work and to live. That is particularly an issue in London, where it is related to the housing and child care costs. We need to ensure that such women receive the very best assistance before they take the step of leaving benefit in order to obtain work.

Lisa Harker's report into child poverty at the end of last year projected that, if the rate of job exits among lone parents was reduced to that of non-lone parents, the Government's target of 70 per cent. employment could be met without any increase in the number of lone parents entering work. While skills and support are vital, messages from the Government also play an important part. Once additional skills have been achieved, with real effort and at some personal cost, the pay rise can be gained and the lone parent is ready to enjoy the fruits of their hard work. However, for some of those women, the loss of help with child care costs, rent and tax credits can mean that they face what I would call a marginal tax rate as high as 96 per cent.

At the centre of the marginal tax rate is housing benefit. I am bombarded with evidence about how it combines with other sources of income to create a poverty trap for those already in low-paid work. At the centre of that is a 65p in the pound withdrawal rate of housing benefit as income increases. As the Hills report stated, a couple with two children paying a typical private rent of £120 a week—frankly, if £120 a week was the price people were paying for their rent in West Ham, they would think that all their Christmases had come at once, but let us stay with the Hills report—would, as a result of reduced benefit and tax credits and a higher rate of national insurance, gain only £23 if their earnings rose from £100 to £400. For those in temporary accommodation with high rents paid through housing benefit—in my constituency, two-bedroom flats can go for more than £1,000 a month—those effects extend to even higher levels. If we are to make serious progress with making aspiration pay in the UK, I believe that the housing benefit regime merits further and urgent investigation.

Let me reiterate, as I draw to my conclusion, that this legislative programme is ambitious and forward looking. It proposes measures to tackle the most pressing issues facing Britain as a society, as an economy and as a nation. Such measures can only be improved by this inaugural opportunity to debate the draft legislative programme in advance.

9.51 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said that it was a privilege to speak in such a debate. She is, of course, right, but it is not a privilege of which many Members have wanted to avail themselves. It is an innovation and I welcome the opportunity to influence the Government's entire legislative programme. Clearly, though, that has not attracted an enormous number of Members to the House. That might be to do with the hour—it is 9.52—and we are also on the very cusp of the recess. I suspect, however, that it is more than that. I suspect rather that the Government have a credibility gap as wide as the Clyde. I do not think that hon. Members truly believe that by turning up at this debate they can influence the legislative programme.

If the massed ranks of the Scottish Liberal Democrats really felt that they could influence the Government's programme—if they thought they had the potential to influence all the things that they bang on about week after week in the local papers—they would have been here all evening, rather than turning up a mere four minutes ago—*[Interruption.]* Yes, and on his own!

Mark Lazarowicz *rose—*

Mr. Salmond: Let me develop my points for a few seconds before I give way to my old university friend from Edinburgh.

I was saying that if Members thought that they could influence the Government's legislative programme, they would be crammed into these Benches. The fact that that has not happened suggests to me that, as yet, the Government have not persuaded people that this innovation is meaningful in respect of influencing the Government programme. This debate compares very poorly with a debate on the Gracious Speech, for example, which we would expect to be conducted at a sensible time. Perhaps the Government would like to follow the innovation of the Scottish Parliament and time such a debate, if they truly believe that it is important, at a sensible hour. The Government are going to have to do a great deal more if they are to convince Members that this process is meaningful, as opposed to some early window dressing on the part of the new Administration.

Mark Lazarowicz: The right hon. Gentleman's comments about the numbers here today would be slightly more impressive if he had more than one of his own colleagues in their place for this debate. Leaving that aside, I am disappointed at the cynical manner in which he has started his speech. This is a new procedure. We would all accept that it has to develop and improve in the future, but I hope that, after such a cynical start, the right hon. Gentleman will see the benefits of this process of consultation and join all of us in a spirit of co-operation across Parliaments to ensure that as many people as possible participate and get involved in the Government's programme. We would all like to see that.

Mr. Salmond: I welcome the innovation, but to note the poor attendance at the debate is no more than a fact. There is 33 per cent. of the Scottish National party's representation in the Chamber this evening. If there were 33 per cent. of the hon. Gentleman's party's representation, they would be flooding across the Benches. If there were 33 per cent. of the Scottish Liberal party's representation, it would have at least another one or perhaps two. Statistics are useful when we all know—and each one of us does know—that if Members of this House thought that this was an important constitutional innovation, they would be here to influence the Government.

John Bercow: Given that the right hon. Gentleman is legendarily provocative and a noted crowd-puller, does he think that if hon. Members had been aware in advance that he was intending to seek to catch the eye of the Chair, the attendance would have been dramatically greater?

Mr. Salmond: Unfortunately, it is down to timing. If only the hon. Gentleman had not been called before me then perhaps more Members might have flooded into the Chamber to hear this climax of the debate. To be called provocative by him is one of the great phrases that makes me miss this place. It is the pot calling the kettle black, and it is extraordinary to hear it from the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have such enormous affection.

The Government say that the constitutional reform Bill will be a centrepiece of their legislative programme. It will not surprise the Minister to learn that I want to devote a few remarks to that Bill and the Green Paper, and to say how it could be substantially improved. Last week, I was sitting at the British-Irish Council. Some 20 people were around the table representing two sovereign Governments, three devolved Assemblies and Parliaments, and three island groups. Out of those 20, two were members of the Labour party—the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. There were no members of the Conservative party, although the Secretary of State used to be one of those. There were also no members of the Liberal Democrats. That was the result of a self-denying ordinance, as it were, because, uniquely, the Liberal Democrats have turned down Administration in three Parliaments in the space of the past two months. They turned down the chance of sharing government and sharing power in Scotland. They then turned down the chance of sharing power in Wales, and I understand—at least I read in the papers—that they turned down a role in Government in this place as well. That has resulted in the unique phenomenon of a political party denying itself a role in the British-Irish Council.

None the less, the point remains that out of 20 people representing the various Governments around these islands, only two were members of the governing party in this place; none were members of the Conservative party, and none were members of the Liberal Democrats—in other words, the three parties that dominate this Chamber are in a tiny minority in terms of the configuration of the political geography that has arrived around these islands. *[Interruption.]* I know that it is difficult for some hon. Members in this place to understand, but there have been changes in government: in Northern Ireland, where a Government have come into being; in Scotland, where simultaneously I am in government and in opposition, which is an interesting process; and in Wales, where there has been a fundamental change in the configuration of the Government. That is a huge change in the political geography of these islands, and I saw nothing in the Government's Green Paper which persuaded me that they have caught up with that reality.

For example, way back in 1999 it was envisaged that there would be an organisation of joint ministerial committees to enable the Westminster Government, Ministers and Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and, hopefully, the Assembly in Northern Ireland to engage in dialogue on issues of mutual concern. Those joint ministerial committees, certainly in plenary session, have not met since 2002. In terms of the sub-committees, which are part of that process, only one strand of four sub-committees has met over the past five years, and that is the sub-committee on Europe. An arrangement that was brought into being—presumably, I suppose, because it envisaged a situation in which the same party would not be in government in Westminster as was in government in Scotland or Wales—has fallen into total disrepair. It is important that that instrument, or something like it, be brought back into being very quickly. It is disappointing that the Government Green Paper does not address the nature and evolution of the constitutional changes that have already happened and the mechanisms to cope with them.

Other matters, too, are not addressed in the Green Paper. There is no mention of the British-Irish Council and its potential development. There is no mention of the Act of Settlement, despite the Green Paper's explicit desire to break down barriers to inclusion within "British society". There is no mention of the repeal of that Act, which has institutionalised discrimination against many sections of our current society—incidentally, the Scottish Parliament on one occasion unanimously suggested that that Act should be consigned to the dustbin of history. The Green Paper is also almost silent on the West Lothian question and the disquiet felt by many English MPs and a considerable number of people in England at the absence of a forum in which to address specifically English matters and legislation. I do not think that that will be adequately coped with by a system of regional Select Committees. As I have said, there is nothing on the practical mechanisms for improving the functioning of devolved arrangements. It appears that the UK Government want a new relationship between Government and citizen, but one that that does not extend to examining the relationships between central and devolved Government.

[Mr. Salmond]

There is a huge constitutional conservatism in the Green Paper. Let me illustrate that by quoting a few phrases. It is stated in paragraph 122:

"Parliament stands at the apex of the political system, the supreme legislative body of the United Kingdom...a major symbol of what it means to be British".

The principle that

"devolution does not cede sovereignty"

is also restated.

Yet only recently a quite different view was held by many concerned people in Scotland. A statement of 30 March 1989 declares:

"We, gathered...do hereby acknowledge the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of government best suited to their needs, and do hereby declare and pledge that in all of our actions and deliberations their interests shall be paramount".

That was signed by every Labour MP with one exception: Tam Dalyell. It was signed by the current Prime Minister. Since then, there has almost been a retrenchment into a constitutional conservatism with the window-dressing of change.

Regardless of where Members stand on the future of the constitution, it is absurd that the UK Government wish to have a "national conversation" when they alone are seen as having total and complete certainty that the current constitutional position is the right one, maintained as

"the apex of the political system, the supreme legislative body of the United Kingdom...a major symbol of what it means to be British".

It is odd that measures which are presumably designed to empower the citizen make an assumption about the attitudes of those citizens and almost ignore the substantial political changes that are taking place. That is exemplified by the configuration of the British-Irish Council.

There is throughout the Green Paper an obsession with forging a sense of Britishness as a conceptual framework for legislative changes to follow. That is highlighted as a key objective. That concept is fundamentally out of date. It more reflects a sense of confusion in respect of what might be politically advantageous for a Scottish Prime Minister seeking electoral success in England than the reality of modern Scotland and modern Wales—and even, to some extent, modern Northern Ireland.

I do not agree that the Prime Minister should try to mask his Scottishness in order to convince England of his worth. I have a much higher view of English voters. I think that the Prime Minister will win or lose the next UK general election not on his nationality, but on his policies. The difficulty he faces is in getting to grips with the fact that we now have a multi-identity state. In Scotland, there is a resurgent Scottish identity and, crucially, that identity includes diversity.

A very interesting study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation last year, conducted by the universities of St. Andrews and Stirling, surveyed attitudes towards Scottishness of young Asian Scots. The study showed that young Asian Scots felt more Scottish than their white counterparts, because they felt that Scottishness was an inclusive identity. I doubt whether another society in western Europe could make that claim at the present moment. It is an important finding, which got relatively little publicity in the Scottish press. I am certain that if the finding had been otherwise, it would have got major publicity. It is a finding that makes me proud to be Scottish, and which should give the UK Government cause to reflect on the dangers of looking for identity that does not allow reflective diversity. Some of what is in the Green Paper seems to suggest that the Government are moving down that road.

The Prime Minister's attempt to contrive a new-found sense of Britishness is deeply misguided. The only thing that is absolutely clear is that, after some time of trying, he has been unsuccessful thus far in his attempt. I have no doubt that if anyone in these islands is able to buck the trends that have been taking place in Scotland and elsewhere for a generation and more, it is the current Prime Minister. However, this quest for Britishness—at the very time when Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are moving on a perhaps different path and exploring new avenues of expression, government and society—seems to me backward-looking and misguided.

I want to draw a contrast between the approach of the Green Paper—which should have been consultative, as Green Papers usually are—and that of the Scottish Government's forthcoming White Paper. Rather than dictating the answers, my Government will champion the natural evolution of Scottish democracy, and consider sincerely and openly the spectrum of powers that will inevitably flow from this place to the Scottish Parliament. Let me welcome in particular the indication from the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) this evening that he is in favour of a referendum at some point to advance such arguments. I do not know whether that was inadvertent, but it is substantial progress in terms of the dialogue taking place in Scotland. So we will approach our White Paper on the constitution with the conviction that our case for an independent Scotland is the right one, but that the process will also involve genuinely listening to other people's ideas.

The Prime Minister has fundamentally misunderstood the situation. Much of Scotland is relaxed about its identity and its future. It is a country comfortable with the inevitability of further constitutional change—change that is bound to repatriate further powers to Scotland. My submission this evening is that Scotland has moved on, Wales is moving on, and Northern Ireland is moving on; it is time that England moved on, as well.

10.8 pm

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Leader of the House referred to the fact that all Members had been sent a copy of the booklet. It is important to put it on the record that I received a letter from her this morning, dated 20 July, enclosing the booklet. The same is true of a number of colleagues to whom I have spoken. The letter says:

"I am keen that Members have the fullest possible chance to consider the Government's proposals in advance of the debate on Wednesday 25 July. I therefore enclose the Command Paper, 'The Governance of Britain—The Government's Draft Legislative Programme'."

All present will agree that in order to have had a proper debate today, it would have been much more helpful to have received the letter and enclosed booklet several days earlier.

This is not the first time that the office of the Leader of the House has given information for debate at the very last minute. Last week, there was a discussion in Committee of the remit of the Leader of the House, and Committee members did not receive the information that was to be discussed until the morning of that Committee's sitting. I respectfully suggest that the Leader of the House take note and, in the interests of protecting the welfare and concerns of all hon. Members, rectify the situation in future.

The distinguishing feature of the debate is the sheer audacity of the Government in pretending that they are presenting new policies in their draft legislative programme, when they clearly are not. I suggest that the Government take note of the words of the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Edward Miliband), who will write Labour's next election manifesto. Earlier this week, in an interview with *The Guardian*, he said with reference to the new Prime Minister taking over:

"It requires being very candid about what has gone wrong".

As the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House have shown a reluctance towards such candour, let me assist them.

The brutal truth is that the Government have had a decade to deal with the issues that they speak of in the draft legislative programme, and they have failed to do so. The programme gives new meaning to the word recycling. It is a programme of recycled material. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) eloquently made that point when she listed all 23 Bills that have been previously mentioned in the public domain.

When the Prime Minister spoke of his new measures for building more houses, he should have qualified his words by saying, "As I have previously mentioned, in 1994, 1998, 2005 and 2006." On education, with reference to young people staying on in education and training, the Prime Minister should have started by saying, "As I said more than a decade ago, in 1996." The hon. Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) emphasised the importance of education, especially in a global market, but in the past 10 years we have seen a rise of 1 million in the number of young people who are not in education, training or work. On fixed-interest mortgages for 20 or 25 years, the Prime Minister should have started by saying, "As I said four years ago, in 2003."

The Bills on those issues, and others in the programme, are nothing more than repetition from the past, with a huge dose of spin added to them. This programme is the result of failure, not success, in the past decade. Let us consider some of the specific issues.

Mr. Salmond: I have some sympathy with the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, but does he agree that what is really at stake is the process? The issue is whether hon. Members believe that they can influence the Government in this debate. If they thought that, this would be, for obvious reasons, a hugely important parliamentary occasion. It is one thing to say that the Government's record is abysmal, but what is it about the process in which we are engaged that has not convinced hon. Members?

Mr. Vara: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, to which I shall refer later. He makes a good point when he says that if Members genuinely believed that they had the opportunity to influence the Government, they might have turned up in greater numbers than they have done tonight.

Mark Lazarowicz: Are not the hon. Gentleman's remarks somewhat inconsistent with the welcome that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) gave to the process?

Mr. Vara: We welcome the process, but we criticise the end product, which will mean that the views of hon. Members will not be taken into account. If the hon. Gentleman would care to listen further, I will come to that point a little later in my speech.

Simon Hughes: As encouragement for the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) I wanted to point out that we started without any prospect of a separate debate. We had to battle for that and we got it. Clearly, it has not been at an ideal time of day, because other business got in the way and the Government did not organise it very well. The Government have a lot of learning to do, and our view is that a good start has been made in theory, but that the practice leaves a lot for delivery.

Mr. Vara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment, and repeat that I shall return to the efficacy of the process a little later. For the record, I should clarify that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead said that she welcomed the debate. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) would do well to make sure that he uses the correct wording in future.

I turn now to some of the specific issues. The Government should take no pride in the fact that they are proposing to introduce the 65th criminal justice Bill since 1997. As the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) said, it is quality not quantity that matters. As for extending the 28-day detention period for terror suspects, the Government should accept that any change should be based not on rhetoric and soundbites but on proper and compelling evidence. So far, that is clearly lacking.

The draft programme also contains a new health Bill. People all over the country are suffering from hospital closures and cuts in departments—especially accident and emergency units and maternity units—so it beggars belief that the Government are still tinkering with our health structure after a decade in power. That is a mark of failure, not success. While I am on matters medical, I commend my hon. Friend the Member Buckingham (John Bercow) on his typically passionate and learned speech. Among other matters, he spoke about the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill, and I have no doubt that he will make a significant contribution to its discussion in this House.

The draft programme is significant in that it highlights what is not included in the list of Bills. In his statement to Parliament on 11 July, the Prime Minister said that

"in the interests of good and open government and public debate"

[Mr. Vara]

the summer statement

"can be the subject of widespread and informed public debate."—[*Official Report*, 11 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1449.]

That is fine sounding, but if the Prime Minister and his Government genuinely care about what people think, why have they not included a Bill to have a referendum on the European treaty that is currently on the table, even though 86 per cent. of the British public want one? Incidentally, the Government's closed mind on the matter is further endorsed by the fact that there is still no English version of the treaty. There is a French version, of course, but not an English one. It is bad enough to ignore the views of 86 per cent. of the British public, but it is much worse for the Government to seek to stifle debate by not having an English version of the treaty.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead said, the draft legislative programme makes no mention of the proposed reclassification of cannabis, or of the U-turn on super-casinos. Those matters were left to be dealt with by planted questions. It has nothing on prisons, or on the West Lothian question mentioned by the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond).

We are told by the Prime Minister and the Government that they will listen to the views of the public and others on various subjects, but our experience so far suggests the contrary. The Government have announced a plan to build 3 million new homes by 2020, but they have ignored the advice that they have already received from their own consultants. They have warned that building so many homes in some areas could increase the danger of flash flooding if land needed for drainage is concreted over.

Given the circumstances, the response from the Minister for Housing showed an extraordinary attitude. In a recent Sunday newspaper article, she wrote:

"To paraphrase Bill Clinton, it's about building more homes, stupid."

I suggest that she be less judgmental of her critics and pay a little more attention to the advice of experts in the field.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith spoke of first-time buyers and about helping people to get on to the housing ladder. He will be aware that after a decade of Labour government home ownership is actually falling for the first time since figures were published. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke of the need for more social housing and highlighted the fact that there is a 13-year wait for a four-bedroom house. I have to tell her that under 10 years of Labour government less social housing was built every year than in every year of the predecessor Government.

Much has been made of the Government's desire to consult on the draft legislative programme and to listen to the public, but if a member of the public visits the Cabinet Office website they will find that they are restricted to using only 1,000 characters in their response. After taking account of commas, full stops and spaces, that leaves about 150 words. There we have it: the Government want to hear from the public, but only if the response is confined to 150 words. Given that many politicians have a problem articulating points succinctly, it is indeed ironic that the public should be subjected to such a limit.

This draft programme represents a decade of failure, a decade of spin and a decade of style over substance. The proposed Bills are nothing new; they are old, rehashed and recycled, and the so-called public consultation is nothing more than a cosmetic exercise—it is sham, pure and simple. The Opposition are not falling for that publicity stunt and neither are the public.

10.21 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Helen Goodman): I am pleased to have the opportunity to reply to this important debate. The benefits of the decision to publish the legislative programme in draft and to give Parliament an opportunity to discuss the draft proposals have been vindicated by the debate. I point out to the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) that it is not a question of quantity; it is the quality that counts.

As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) said, the special debate on the draft programme was requested by the Opposition following the Prime Minister's statement. It was a request to which we were happy to accede.

Mrs. May: People might think that greater importance was attached to the debate if the Leader of the House was actually present for the wind-ups.

Helen Goodman: I have just been informed that the Leader of the House is on her way here—which has nothing to do with the criticism the right hon. Lady makes.

The debate demonstrates that Parliament has a role in considering the direction and content—

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why the Leader of the House may have been caught slightly short is that the debate has gone short? The Opposition demanded the debate, yet they cannot even fill the time.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

I promise Members who have taken part in the debate that we shall ensure that their detailed and specific points about particular pieces of legislation will be drawn to the attention of the relevant Ministers and Departments.

Mr. Salmond: Which of the various suggestions that the hon. Lady heard this evening was she most attracted to move into the Government's programme? Perhaps it was the joint ministerial Committee proposal. Is that one of the things that attracted the hon. Lady?

Helen Goodman: If the right hon. Gentleman will be a little more patient, I shall come to that very issue.

I believe that the more open and participative process helps to make the Executive more accountable. Publishing the draft legislative programme is part of our wider proposals on constitutional reform, which will strengthen Parliament's effectiveness and authority and help to reinvigorate our democracy.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead was particularly critical of the fact that a number of the items in the draft legislative programme were already known to her, because they had been in draft Bills, White Papers and Green Papers or because of various consultations. She totally fails to realise that that is not a criticism; it is, in fact, a strength. It shows that the Government are more open and that we are providing opportunities for pre-legislative scrutiny that never existed in the years before we came to power.

My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) spoke about how the programme will benefit his constituency. In particular, he talked about the Local Transport Bill and the importance of having high-quality public transport and giving local authorities power and control over the planning of local transport. The powers that will be given to local authorities will improve the quality of transport and enable them to pull together planning for land and for transport. That will make a significant difference to the quality of local transport.

My hon. Friend spoke about his constituents' problems. His constituency obviously has a significant legacy of heavy industry. He spoke movingly about his constituents' problems with asbestos-related diseases, which the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill will address. It is absolutely clear that only a Labour Government would have taken steps to address that important problem.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the education and skills Bill, the importance of taking a long-term, strategic approach and the difficulty of predicting the way that the economy will develop and therefore the importance of giving people a broad, flexible education as they go through life. I will draw all those points to the attention of the relevant Ministers.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) welcomed the new process, although he said that the timetable was a bit short. It might be appropriate for me also to comment now on the points made by the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara) on the timetable, which he felt was slightly truncated, and on the difficulty of responding to the process. I should like to tell hon. Members that, far from being limited to 1,000 characters on the website, any member of the public who wishes to respond to the legislative programme is free to e-mail the Leader of the House or myself. In fact, this afternoon I received a seven-page e-mail on the draft legislative programme from the Royal National Institute of Blind People.

Mr. Vara: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: Let me just describe to the hon. Gentleman what has been going on, as he seems to be so sceptical.

The RNIB's e-mail describes in detail its response to the whole legislative programme. It does not focus on health matters. It looks at transport in particular. Publishing the draft programme now gives it the opportunity to develop that kind of cross-cutting, wide-ranging approach.

Mr. Vara: May I refer the hon. Lady to a copy of the page that I have from the Cabinet Office, which specifically refers to 1,000 characters? Nowhere on it do I see a reference to the fact that people can write in separately. Does she agree that if the public can write in separately, it makes sense to advise them of that, rather giving a one-way direction asking for no more than 1,000 characters?

Helen Goodman: The website makes it perfectly clear that members of the public can e-mail the Leader of the House or the Deputy Leader of the House. Were it not clear, we would not have received the submission this afternoon.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): I am conscious of the fact that it is eight minutes since the hon. Lady started speaking and the Leader of the House has still not appeared. Does the hon. Lady happen to know where the Leader of the House is, and where she is on her way from? It seems rather a long time to be leaving the hon. Lady on her own. *[Interruption.]*

Helen Goodman: The Leader of the House has just arrived. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is now totally satisfied.

There was also a complaint that there were many Bills on the same subject. I would like to point out that it is this Government who introduced pre-legislative scrutiny, and who doubled the level of resources for parliamentary counsel to ensure that drafting was done properly. The constant complaints from Opposition Members about the clarity of legislation are a slur on the professionalism of parliamentary counsel.

Mr. Vara: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: No, I have already given way twice to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Vara: Once.

Helen Goodman: Twice.

Furthermore, situations change—and when they do, it would be foolish not to look again at the legislative framework. Finally, we are going to consider the proposals from the Law Commission on post-legislative scrutiny. I hope that that, in particular, will meet some of the concerns that were expressed.

Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Lady give way—once?

John Bercow: Is that a promise?

Simon Hughes: Yes, it is a promise.

Helen Goodman: Yes, I will.

Simon Hughes: I am very grateful. The hon. Lady knows that, as I have acknowledged, all the things that she has said are welcome. One thing that would lessen the burden on parliamentary counsel, as well as on everybody else, would be not to introduce in October a Bill that the Government propose to amend substantially in November. Will she and her colleague think again about taking the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill out until it is ready to be put in, so that everybody will be better off and less under pressure?

Helen Goodman: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says.

The hon. Gentleman said in his speech that the key criterion that he used for judging the quality of legislation was whether it increased liberty and whether it devolved decisions. It was this Government who introduced the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. In the current Session, we have introduced the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, which does precisely what he is calling for.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the possible benefits, as he sees it, of having a business committee of the whole House. In this Chamber, the risk with having a business committee is that it would simply be used to obstruct the legislative programme that people have voted for, and which was in the Government's manifesto. What he is suggesting is really rather impractical.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the importance of children in care. He is absolutely right: we are concerned, which is why the legislation that we will introduce will enable the voice of the child to be heard, and will improve the quality and stability of placements. The hon. Gentleman said that he wanted to see more Bills in plain English, and that is precisely what we are going to do with the marine Bill.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members said that they wanted us to put forward only necessary legislation. That is rather like the position that Opposition parties take on spending cuts and tax cuts. It is very easy to say in general, "Oh yes, we don't want that piece of legislation," but not one hon. Member in the whole debate made a single suggestion about what particular measures they did not want to see.

Mr. Kemp: On that point, in the interests of cross-party consensus, does my hon. Friend think that it would be a good idea to invite Her Majesty's official Opposition to publish an alternative Queen's Speech, so that we could see what ideological direction the Tory party would take?

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent suggestion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) made a typically thoughtful and wide-ranging speech. In particular, he discussed housing need in his constituency. He pointed out that housing is a devolved matter, and it was disappointing that the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) did not take the opportunity to set out the housing policy that—

Mr. Salmond: I know that I serve in two Chambers, and these days I am a model of consensual government and patience—that patience is being rewarded—but I can only be in government in one Chamber at a time. If the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) wants to transport himself to the Scottish Parliament, I am sure that I will be able to answer all his questions even better than the Deputy Leader of the House is managing to answer them.

Helen Goodman: At one point in our discussion on housing, I felt that we were about to move into a full-scale debate on housing policy. The needs of Travellers were raised, and I assure hon. Members that we will introduce legislation to address the security of tenure issues that are of particular concern to that community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith made a point about planning gain supplement revenues generated in areas covered by a devolved Administration. Let me make it absolutely clear that those revenues will be returned to the country in which they are generated, but their use will be determined by the relevant Administration. He also spoke about the importance of tackling fuel poverty, and I am sure that the energy Bill will help to ensure that energy supply companies focus their efforts much more tightly than they have done hitherto.

Mark Lazarowicz: I would like to go back to my hon. Friend's previous point; I was not sure whether she was going to say any more about it. My problem is not about whether the money raised by the planning gain supplement will return to the devolved Administrations; it is clearly right that it should. My problem is about ensuring that once it returns to a devolved Administration, it goes a bit further and is passed down to the communities from which it originated. I know that that is a matter for the devolved Parliaments to discuss, and that is fine, but I hope that my hon. Friend will give me an assurance that it is for the majorities in the devolved Parliaments to decide on the matter, and that the decision will not be left to a minority Government with minority support.

Helen Goodman: That issue will have to be taken up elsewhere. My hon. Friend also talked about the importance of having a marine Bill. Through our manifesto, we are committed to introducing a marine Bill, and we will do so in the coming Parliament. We will publish a draft in the coming year, to ensure full pre-legislative scrutiny. He also spoke about the important pre-legislative scrutiny that has just been undertaken on the Climate Change Bill.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) spoke about issues that related particularly to women. He considered the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill and asked whether it would present an opportunity for amendments on abortion to be made. He described his views on abortion, which were typically subtle and nuanced. Obviously, whether hon. Members will be able to make amendments is a matter for the House authorities. There has been pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill, and I do not at this stage know whether the report from the Joint Committee on the Draft Human Tissue and Embryos Bill will address that question. By chance, the report is being published tomorrow, so the hon. Gentleman will not have to wait long to find out the answer. I caution the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is an extremely important piece of legislation about balancing the ethical and the scientific issues. Abortion is also an extremely important issue, but it may not be entirely helpful for either piece of law to handle them together.

John Bercow: I appreciate that nuanced, calibrated and subtle response to my earlier point. If the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill is not the appropriate vehicle for a discussion of potential reform of the abortion law, I hope the Government will provide an alternative vehicle. The matter needs to be addressed, and sooner rather than later.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman made it plain earlier that that was his view. He also spoke about the importance of a single equalities Bill. Again, that is a matter on which Labour made a manifesto commitment, and we will produce a draft Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny over the coming year, so that we have a thorough and well-grounded piece of legislation to introduce at a later stage, as time allows. It is particularly pleasant to listen to the hon. Member for Buckingham, who always gives such positive endorsement of the Labour Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke in her usual sensitive but energetic way about the needs of her constituents. She spoke about the problems of housing and homelessness and suggested a number of practical solutions. I know that since she was elected she has been concerned about the structure of housing benefit. We will ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions reads her speech so that it can consider the matter further. My hon. Friend also spoke about counter-terrorism and the importance of making progress on that. I hope she will be satisfied with the way in which the Prime Minister set out in his statement this afternoon how future consultation will work.

The right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) made a somewhat predictable speech dealing with constitutional reform, the West Lothian question, and the state of the devolved Administrations. At no point in his speech did he acknowledge that the devolved Administrations were the creation of a Labour Government. He raised the matter of a joint ministerial committee. The Government are well aware of his calls for the joint ministerial committee to meet, and will consider the proposal.

Mr. Salmond: The Scottish Parliament was established by the Scottish people in a referendum. As for the joint ministerial committee, that was a Labour Government proposal. It was a Labour Government measure, but has fallen into disuse since 2002. What could be the argument for that mechanism not to be working, instead of falling into disuse? Perhaps the Deputy Leader of the House could think about the argument and give me a little more comfort that, having read my speech in advance, she has considered the point closely enough to be able to give me an answer.

Helen Goodman: I must disappoint the right hon. Gentleman. He will appreciate that I will not be the person taking a decision on the meetings of the joint ministerial committee, but he should rest assured that it is under active consideration.

The hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara) asked about the publication. It was available in the Vote Office on 11 July. There has been such a run on the document that we have had to reprint it.

Mr. Vara: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but I think it relevant to repeat the words of the Leader of the House in the letter sent to colleagues:

"I am keen that Members have the fullest possible chance to consider the Government's proposals in advance of the debate on Wednesday 25 July."

There was no point in sending that letter if the hon. Lady is going to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that the document was available in the Vote Office.

Helen Goodman: My right hon. and learned Friend was enthusiastic that all this should be brought to the attention of all Members of the House; that is why she adopted that supererogatory approach.

Six months ago, Conservative Members were saying that we could not renew in Government, but we have shown that we can. For us, renewal is not simply an exercise in PR and spin. We are reforming the way that we do politics. As a first step in our wider constitutional reform programme, we are introducing a new process that strengthens parliamentary accountability and public openness. We are able to renew and reform because we understand the challenges of the modern world; that is why we have the groundbreaking and far-sighted Climate Change Bill, and why we are going to have a new scientific and ethical framework through the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill. We are able to renew and reform because our policies are rooted in the values of social justice; that is why we are addressing child maintenance and the needs of children in care. We are able to renew and reform because our policies are rooted in our communities. We understand people's aspirations; that is why we are proposing flagship Bills on education and skills, housing and regeneration. I commend the publication and its contents to the House.

Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household (Mr. Thomas McAvoy): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 26th July, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until he has notified the Royal Assent to Acts agreed upon by both Houses.—*[Mr. McAvoy.]*

PETITIONS

Fort Augustus Post Office

10.47 pm

Danny Alexander (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (LD): It is my honour to present a petition on behalf of concerned users of Fort Augustus post office. It is signed by 700 people—a substantial majority of the community in Fort Augustus and the neighbouring areas of Glenmoriston and other surrounding villages. It has the support not only of the local MSP, John Farquhar Munro, but of myself, and it is an honour to present it to the House.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons,

The petition of concerned users of Fort Augustus Post Office.

Declares that the below petitioners are concerned for the future of their local Post Office in Fort Augustus and the damaging economic and social effects that any closure would have on their community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the government to reconsider its proposed closure programme before irreparable damage is done to the community of Fort Augustus and other Highland communities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Nursery Care

10.48 pm

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): This is a petition from professional nursery staff, parents of nursery age children and others. It states:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of professional nursery staff, parents and others

Declares that nurseries, pre-schools and day-care providers fulfil a vital role in the development of young children; that, in this country, private, voluntary and independent nurseries provide the overwhelming majority of nursery care and education and that the Government's new Code of Practice (concerning Nursery Education Funding) fundamentally changes the rules regarding the provision of free nursery places for three and four-year olds.

Further declares that the petitioners are concerned that this new Code of Practice will: cause significant financial harm and insecurity in the nursery sector; force existing trusted nurseries out of business; create uncertainty for families and staff; and lead to a shortage of high-quality nursery education.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to halt the implementation of this Code of Practice and undertake an urgent assessment of its impact on nurseries.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

HMRC Office (Newport)

10.49 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport, East) (Lab): I present this petition on behalf of my constituents who are concerned about the possible closure of, and relocation of jobs from, the tax office in Newport city, which is regenerating and working hard to attract jobs and investment.

The petition states:

That the Newport office is recognised as a centre of excellence thanks to the dedication of the staff who offer first class service to local clients. The proposed relocation would have a negative effect on the local economy and staff, the majority of whom are women with caring responsibilities, and would face a lengthy commute.

The petitioners therefore request that this House calls upon the Government to consider fully the case for retaining Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs Newport office and explore alternatives in light of the impact of staff, the economy and the environment that reorganisation would cause.

To lie upon the Table.

367 Bus Route (South London)

10.50 pm

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition from residents of Croydon and others who are concerned about the implications of the free bus pass for under-18s, as it affects current capacity on the 367 bus route. They are also concerned about the issue of antisocial behaviour, with youth gang warfare in the locality, and are therefore seeking extra policing to deal with the matter.

The petition states:

That the current capacity on the 367 bus route in south London is not sufficient to cope with the demand at the end of the school day and that extra policing should be provided to deal with antisocial behaviour.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Transport to ask Transport for London to improve the capacity on the 367 bus route in south London, and ensure that policing is improved on this route.

And the petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Handley Hill Primary School

10.51 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to present a petition on behalf of the community in Handley Hill in Winsford in the county of Cheshire in my constituency, and those interested in the maintenance of primary education in Handley Hill.

The petitioners—more than 1,115 of them—are particularly concerned. Their small community has rapidly gathered signatures in support of a school that is now threatened under an absurdly named closure programme by the local education authority called TLC. Those initials are normally referred to much more kindly, but in this case they stand for transforming learning communities, which is a disguise for a proposal to close this school. Its excellent teaching is vital to the community. The committed governors, parents, grandparents, friends and indeed pupils of this excellent school are deeply concerned that its absence from education provision in a town that is often challenged by many socio-economic and behavioural issues would cause adverse consequences to a town that needs to be supported.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take steps to resist any proposals for the closure of Handley Hill primary school as currently included within this absurdly named TLC programme and re-dedicates its support for the continuing high-quality education at this establishment.

And the petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

A264 Langton Road (Tunbridge Wells)

10.53 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 767 constituents who are concerned about the safety record of the A264 at Heathgate Corner, a stretch of road that has a notorious accident record stretching over many years.

The petition states:

The petition of residents and users of the A264 Langton road near Tunbridge Wells declares that in the light of 11 accidents this year to date on the above road at Heathgate Corner, urgent measures should be taken to improve the safety of the road.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to call upon the Secretary of State for Transport urgently to review what additional safety measures are necessary and to order improvements that will protect the lives of road users, pedestrians and residents.

And the petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

School Bus Service (Burton Latimer)

10.54 pm

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I wish to present a petition about the loss of the school bus service from Burton Latimer to Latimer community arts college, which was presented to me today by a delegation of 32 pupils and parents from Burton Latimer together with the Burton Latimer town mayor.

The petition states:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled.

The Humble Petition of Michelle Evans of 79 Queensway, Burton Latimer, Northamptonshire, the town mayor of Burton Latimer, and some 700 others of like disposition listed below sheweth

That Latimer Community Arts College, located in Barton Seagrave, is the main secondary school serving children from Burton Latimer, Northamptonshire, and attendance at the school for hundreds of local pupils is an important part of community life, but that getting to school is going to become a lot more difficult for local pupils due to the decision by Northamptonshire County Council to end the school bus service from Burton Latimer to Latimer Community Arts College.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House calls upon Northamptonshire County Council to reverse its decision to end the school bus service from Burton Latimer to Latimer Community Arts College and ensure that this important school bus service remains in operation for the benefit of local pupils.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

To lie upon the Table.

London Population (ONS)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McAvoy.]*

10.55 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I might have cut things a little fine for my question this morning, but I have had ample leisure to repent while waiting for the debate this evening. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an important issue for many Londoners.

It is appropriate to raise population statistics compilation in London with the Exchequer Secretary, who earlier today dealt with the motion about the chair of the Statistics Board. There is a link. In the earlier debate, several hon. Members referred to the general population's lack of confidence in official statistics. I believe that the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) made the point that one of the biggest causes of lack of confidence in official statistics is that they are sometimes demonstrably plain wrong. That is exactly the problem with the methodology that produces the official population statistics for London.

London Councils, which has been most anxious to hold such a debate, compiled compelling evidence that the methodology that the Office for National Statistics used to calculate the population of London is seriously flawed. Consequently, the official population statistic significantly understates the capital's population. London Councils has repeatedly raised the matter with the ONS and the previous Treasury team of Ministers without success—hence its desire for a debate, and I am happy to do my best to oblige.

Lack of confidence in the London population statistics is not new. Westminster city council eventually successfully challenged the population estimates for its city and borough in the 2001 census, which had to be revised upwards after manifest errors were discovered. It was able to point out precisely what had gone wrong. Regrettably, the position has not improved. For reasons that I shall describe, the current methodology of the ONS is flawed and it now proposes to move to a different methodology, which is equally flawed, as can be demonstrated.

It may seem an arcane point, but official population statistics are important. They form part of the basis of important forward planning, such as where more homes, schools and health care facilities should go, long-term policy decisions about, for example, where new transport infrastructure should go, and operational decisions about police numbers for each borough and fire service cover. The risk assessment includes population levels and it is therefore important that the statistics are accurate. They are also important because they are part of the formula to allocate Government grant to councils for local services. If they do not reflect where the people who use the services are, resources will not be directed correctly. That leads ultimately to waste. The concern of London Councils, therefore, is that the funding cake for local government should be divided up on the basis of accurate figures, whatever its size. If it is not, the risk is that London might lose out unfairly. I should like to address that issue in a little more detail.

[Robert Neill]

In summary, when London Councils compared the theoretically based estimations of population with detailed work that had been done on the ground in a number of London boroughs, it was able to demonstrate serious underestimation, in particular of the amount of in-migration to the capital. For example, the evidence shows an underestimation of 3,300 people in Enfield and of 2,000 people in Brent, as compared with the number of people who are demonstrably there on the ground in those boroughs. In Newham, it was possible to demonstrate that there were 750 more schoolchildren than were "officially estimated"—the key point is that, unlike the estimates, the schoolchildren are actually there. Similar demonstrations of inaccuracy have been made in Croydon. The problem is not just a London problem. Outside London, Slough has demonstrated an under-calculation of 6,000 people in its population.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning Croydon. The borough has also seen a downward revision on the various ONS calculations and assumptions. However, that has come at a time when the number of migrants registered with GPs was more than 37,000 in the five-year period to April 2007 and when the number of national insurance numbers given out from 2002 to 2006 was almost 18,000. I also know from correspondence with the Jobcentre Plus office that national insurance number registrations accelerated to 7,000 in the first 11 months of the following financial year. Places such as Croydon are suffering from problems in their local government settlement, such that the rate at which they are delivering universal services—that is, non-social services and non-education provision—is only a quarter of the rate for other London councils. Does my hon. Friend agree that the figures for migrants are having an impact on the local government financial settlements that councils enjoy?

Robert Neill: They certainly are. My hon. Friend makes a valid point. It is not good enough for the Government to say, for example, that migrants frequently move on quickly. That is not demonstrated by the evidence on the ground and nor does it deal with the point that, for a period, migrants live in London, which is often the first port of call. While they are there, they are using London services, and the cost of that has to be met in one way or another.

It is fair to say that those shortfalls are recognised by other responsible bodies, not just by the London boroughs. I remind the Exchequer Secretary of a piece in *The Guardian* in April, in which the Home Office Minister responsible for immigration said that

"at the very least the Office for National Statistics needs to improve its figures on which key local financing decisions are based, but it also means the tough enforcement of immigration laws, including the prosecution of employers of illegal migrants."

That is an acceptance by one of the Exchequer Secretary's colleagues in Government that the ONS needs to improve its act. Referring to the current method of calculating in-migration, which is based on the international passenger survey—a small sample survey of people arriving—the Governor of the Bank of England said last November:

"A survey that was designed to learn more about tourism and business travel is not the best source of data from which to learn about migration."

That is a pretty unanswerable point. Lord Bruce-Lockhart, the chairman of the Local Government Association, has said:

"It is essential that the government gets the figures right on migration. That is currently not happening and local authorities are suffering as a consequence. Councils are finding it difficult to provide services to growing populations that are not recognised by government statistics."

The Mayor of London and the London assembly have both complained about the inadequacy of the figures going back to the 2001 census. The Mayor has commented on the fact that the Lisson Grove estate, which contributed substantially to his majority when he was a Member of this House, seemed to have disappeared from the census calculations. It is not often that I agree with the Mayor of London, and I could not agree with him on that one.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that this is not a matter of party political tension? It is a shared view across the parties and among independent people across Greater London. Is he also aware that in constituencies such as mine there is a turnover of those registered of between 25 and 40 per cent. a year? The reality is that, unless we have a five-yearly census or, even better, an annual opportunity to count, we will never begin to catch up and accurately measure the numbers in a way that can be reflected in an accurate apportionment of grant by central Government to local government.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is consensus on this between all three parties in the Association of London Government, and this view was endorsed by its leaders committee in its most up-to-date report only a few weeks ago.

I have set out why this matter is important for the levels of funding for personal services, adult services and children's services, the capitation formula for primary care trust funding and the dedicated schools grant. All those issues and more depend on getting this right. The criticisms have been well set out and, with respect, it is not good enough for the Government to retreat into the position that they and the ONS have so far adopted, saying that they have used the best available statistics. In this case, the best available statistics are demonstrably wrong.

The final piece of evidence that I should like to pray in aid is a survey by the City of Westminster which shows that some 40,000 new national insurance numbers were issued to residents of Westminster between 2002 and 2004. That represents a 17 per cent. increase on the 2001 base population. It might shock hon. Members to learn that that survey also shows that about 20,000 people arrive at Victoria coach station every week, predominantly from eastern Europe. For at least some of the time after they arrive in the UK, they will be in London.

The movement from the international passenger survey with the labour force survey will not, regrettably, make things better. It is suggested that the labour force survey got nearer to the estimate than the IPS in 2001, but if we go back to 1991, it was the other way round. So there is no guarantee that it is better. In fact, the labour force survey sample is even smaller than the sample used for the IPS. That is crucial, especially as we are to move to three-year local government finance settlements, starting in 2008. It is therefore all the more important that we

get this right to start with, because the problem will be much more difficult to unpick if we are locked into a three-year settlement on the basis of inaccurate and unreliable figures.

The fault here is that the two methods fail to pick up short-term migrants, to whom I have already referred, or people who live in London for part of the week but are counted as resident elsewhere. Many people live in London for part of the week for their work, not a few of whom are connected to this honourable House, but their family home is regarded as elsewhere, so that is where they live for the purposes of the official population statistics. However, while they are here they use London refuse services, leisure services, street cleansing services, and so on. That is not recognised.

The figures do not take into account either the very real and well documented effect of population churn in large cities such as London. In the City of Westminster and some other central London boroughs, population churn of about a third—up to 34 per cent.—is well documented. That in turn creates particular costs, because it involves one set of short-term migrants being [redacted]d by another. They are not picked up by the offi[redacted]tatistics, but they are nevertheless using local serv[redacted]. The ONS has said that it will publish estimates o[redacted]ort-term migration later in the year, but that will be [redacted] late for the start of the three-year financial settlement in April 2008. Much more urgent action is needed, which is why I have raised the issue in the debate tonight.

I have set out in some detail what is wrong. London Councils does not want the Government to wash their hands like Pontius Pilate and say that it is all down to the quango—the ONS. The Government have responsibility. What we need to do is accept that current estimates are not working and are not fit for purpose, and accept that there is a lack of clarity and transparency. It is reasonable to ensure that we develop a methodology that is robust, up to date and fit for purpose. There must be proper consultation with local authorities before it is changed—that has not happened so far—and minimum standards of accuracy should be set out on a basis that can be agreed between the Treasury, the ONS and local authorities. Perhaps the incoming chair of the Statistics Board could, with a little push from Ministers, take that into account.

If only the Government and the ONS would listen to councils in London, accept what is happening and come up with a solution to restore both fairness and public confidence. That is the reason for this debate at this late hour—late in terms of the time and of the opportunity. We must get things right before the funding settlement cuts in. We contend that the Government cannot abdicate their responsibility on this issue. Ultimately, ONS has to be accountable. So far, regrettably, it has put its head in the sand in the face of compelling evidence. What is needed is for the House and the Government to put pressure on it to accept reality and change things in available ways while there is still time to do so.

11.12 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Angela Eagle): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on securing this evening's debate. I thank him for raising the important issue of the compilation of statistics on London's population. The hon. Gentleman explained that this is such an important issue because ONS population statistics are used to determine local government funding. Equally, they are used to inform local planning in respect of services for the future.

It is precisely because of the importance of these statistics that ONS takes a great deal of care in making them as accurate as possible. ONS is currently involved in ongoing work to improve statistics. I will come on shortly to describe how those statistics are put together, and explain why some of the suggestions about flaws in the methodology are inaccurate.

I would like to start, though, by talking briefly about how these statistics are used, because the impression is sometimes created that local government funding depends entirely upon population statistics. I will not describe in detail the funding formula used for local government—we are all familiar with it, especially with how it impacts on our own areas—not least because it is the responsibility of the Department for Communities and Local Government rather than the Treasury. However, I will say that it takes account of other factors, such as local authorities' ability to raise revenue from council tax, alongside the population statistics, which are clearly important in themselves.

There is also a process known as damping, which is used to ensure that all local authorities receive a minimum increase in grant, known as the floor. That floor means that even if population statistics were to show the population decreasing in an area, the local authority's funding would still increase by a reasonable amount.

Nevertheless, population statistics are clearly important, and they should be as accurate as possible. As well as being used for local government funding, they are used to develop and monitor economic and fiscal policy and to understand social change, as well as any policy implications that stem from it. These statistics are calculated as accurately as possible, using a clear and carefully designed methodology.

One of the challenges for that methodology—it is only part of the task—is to factor in the impact of international migration on population levels. The hon. Gentleman has raised that matter in the House this evening. Migration is largely calculated on the basis of the international passenger survey. We have heard a number of things about the lack of accuracy in the IPS, but I should like to draw attention to areas where it is reasonably robust.

First, it has been claimed that IPS is restricted to the major airports and that it does not include Victoria coach station, for example, where 20,000 people can arrive. Actually, it sampled 16 airports, 11 seaports and the channel tunnel. Clearly, it does not sample Victoria coach station, but that is simply because coaches from other countries cannot get there without passing through a port or the channel tunnel. The IPS picks up the inhabitants of the coach on its way through to Victoria coach station.

Secondly, it is not the case that the international passenger survey's sampling is carried out only during the working day, as critics have said. There is flexibility in when the sampling can take place, especially to include particular flights from particular countries that may arrive early at an airport.

Robert Neill: Will the Minister accept, however, that she is missing an important point? It is important to have accuracy of statistics not just on who is coming into the country through the entry points, but in terms of calculating, for example, local need and grants when people are here. The IPS does nothing to assist in that, for the reasons that I set out.

Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right, and that is why the labour force survey offers extra insight, although I would be the first to say that it is not an actual count of all migrants wherever they are. Even if we could do that and afford to do it regularly, it would still provide only a snapshot of the situation, which, as he said, can be fluid.

The IPS is more comprehensive than is often suggested, but the ONS is committed to ensuring that population statistics are as accurate as possible. It has been working this year on improving its methodology. Plans to do that were published in April. The ONS has held meetings with a number of users, including some London local authorities, to discuss planned changes. Those meetings have led to refinements to the proposals, which were outlined in material published yesterday. There have been workshops and feedback has been given. I expect the dialogue to continue as changes to the methodology to produce more accurate figures are put into effect.

The improvements that the ONS is making to its methodology make the information more accurate and improve quality. In particular, migration estimates will now draw on the labour force survey in addition to the IPS, which will help to reflect what migrants do after they have entered the country and where they settle. There is some evidence that the IPS may be particularly inaccurate for well-known places such as Westminster, Oxford or Manchester because people often fill in a place that they have heard of when asked about their destination, and that is not always where they end up living.

Again, concerns have been raised about aspects of the labour force survey, including the suggestion that it does not take account of people in multi-occupied dwellings. Although it does not take account of people in communal establishments, such as halls of residence, it does cover all types of private households, including those that are in multi-occupied dwellings. While response rates to the survey for multi-occupied dwellings are lower than those for single household dwellings, the weighting of the sample to take account of age, gender and region goes some way to correcting that. There have been improvements and a process of ongoing dialogue with local authorities, including London local authorities. I expect there to be an ongoing liaison.

The improvements in the methodology improve in particular the regional and local distribution of international migrants in the statistics that the ONS produces. Combined sources of such statistics have strengths that increase the robustness and the likely accuracy of the results, rather than taking the results from a single survey. The improved methodology will now be applied to revise population statistics for 2002 to 2005 and to produce 2006 mid-year population estimates, all of which will be released in August.

The improvements will not change the trends demonstrated by the existing methodology's estimates. In particular, figures based on the improved methodology will not show either population or migration levels decreasing. Across England and Wales, the original method showed an increase in population due to long-term international migration. The improved methodology increases that slightly, by 28,000. For London, the existing method implied an increase of 396,000 between 2002 and 2005 as a result of long-term international migration. The revised method reduces that increase to 336,000, but that is not the same as saying that migration is decreasing, and it is certainly not saying that the population is decreasing. Instead, the revised figures show that migration to London remains on an upward trend, but at a lower level than the estimates suggested.

I should re-emphasise that the changes are being made to improve the methodology and accuracy. As well as making the statistics more accurate this year, the ONS has planned further improvements for subsequent years. In particular, an interdepartmental taskforce on international migration statistics was set up in 2006 and has made a number of strategic recommendations for further improvements in the years to 2012. The ONS is already taking forward some of those recommendations, and will publish a full response later in the summer.

The ONS also published a revisions policy earlier this month, setting out the principles for further revisions to population statistics, and it has been working with local authorities and Government Departments to identify how new and existing information sources—such as GP and school registrations—can be used to inform migration estimates and address local issues in population estimation. That goes to the heart of what Members have been talking about.

However, that is not as easy as it might seem. The statistics published yesterday on national insurance numbers issued to overseas nationals caught the media's attention and have been mentioned in our debate, but basing population estimates on national insurance numbers could be misleading, as some people apply for them but do not use them, while others need them only for a short period. In other words, national insurance numbers provide an inflow figure, which is not necessarily a net figure, and many of those who applied for national insurance numbers might have already left the country. National insurance numbers do not show the flow out; they only show the flow in.

That brings me on to my final point, on those who come to the UK only for a short period. The ONS population statistics that I have talked about rely upon the UN definition of a long-term migrant—someone changing their country of usual residence for at least a year. We believe that that is the most appropriate and reasonable definition to use and the most realistic way of accurately determining the population levels in different areas. We recognise that short-term migration is also important, as is churn, but such trends are difficult to pick up on accurately and in a timely fashion without spending one's whole life getting snapshots of an ever-changing situation. That is why I am particularly interested in discovering how we can use other indicators and statistics to get a closer handle at a more disaggregated level on what is happening.

We believe that the annual definition is the most appropriate one to use, but the ONS has been working hard on producing innovative estimates, and will publish national figures later in the year. However, this is a new and difficult area and we cannot expect accuracy immediately as we feel our way towards a solution.

Mr. Pelling: The Minister suggested that there might be other indicators. I mentioned GP registrations as an example. What other possible indicators might be useful?

Angela Eagle: There are several such indicators. The hon. Gentleman mentioned GP registrations. There are also school registrations, but that does not address the short-term or long-term issue. Each attempt to measure accurately at a disaggregated level must be looked at carefully for what it actually tells us. The national insurance numbers demonstrate only flows in; they do not give us a picture of the net situation, nor do they tell us about flows out. They can be more misleading than useful, even though they have been prayed in aid tonight as indicators.

Each attempt to take a look at what is happening in local communities must be analysed to establish its accuracy and its shortcomings as well as the information it provides. The plea I make is that that is what we all have to do as we try to feel our way to a more accurate method of measuring at community level precisely what is going on in a dynamic and open economy.

This has been an important debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for raising it. I look forward to there being ongoing dialogue as the ONS attempts to improve its methodology so that we can have more accurate and better policy.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes past Eleven o'clock.

Deferred Divisions

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Asylum (Designated States) Order 2007, which was laid before this House on 22nd May, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 52.

Division No. 199]

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brown, rh Mr. Gordon
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Field, Mr. Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Paisley, rh Rev. Ian
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen

Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Baker, Norman
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Brake, Tom
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brooke, Annette
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Davey, Mr. Edward
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Foster, Mr. Don
George, Andrew
Gidley, Sandra
Harris, Dr. Evan
Heath, Mr. David
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, David
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Lamb, Norman
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Mercer, Patrick
Moore, Mr. Michael
Mulholland, Greg
Öpik, Lembit
Price, Adam
Pugh, Dr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robertson, Angus
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Russell, Bob
Salmond, rh Mr. Alex
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert
Swinson, Jo
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny

Question accordingly agreed to.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

That the draft Children Act 2004 Information Database (England) Regulations 2007, which were laid before this House on 4th July, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 277, Noes 186.

Division No. 200]

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Brown, rh Mr. Gordon
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, Mr. Liam
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gibson, Dr. Ian
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mahmood, Mr. Khalid
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry

McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Moran, Margaret
Morgan, Julie
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Price, Adam
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Roy, Mr. Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Mr. Paul
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wilson, Phil
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Mr. Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Butterfill, Sir John
Cable, Dr. Vincent
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David *(Haltemprice and Howden)*
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Duddridge, James
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Mr. Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Moore, Mr. Michael
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paisley, rh Rev. Ian
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penrose, John
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew

Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh
Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wright, Jeremy
Young, rh Sir George

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 26 July 2007

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Children in Care

1. **Mrs. Joan Humble** (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps the Government plan to take to improve outcomes for children in care. [152578]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Kevin Brennan): I am very proud to answer the first question on behalf of the new Department for Children, Schools and Families—the "Every Child Matters" Department, including children in care.

The White Paper "Care Matters: Time for Change" proposed a wide range of measures to improve outcomes for children in care, and additional funding of £305 million over four years. We will introduce legislation in the next Session to support implementation; provide a £500 allowance for each child in care falling behind at school; improve stability through parenting support for foster carers and better use of family carers; and improve support for those leaving care.

Mrs. Humble: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to his position, and I also welcome that comprehensive answer. Is he aware that for some time Blackpool council has been developing an advocacy service for children in care in the looked-after system, and is currently developing a looked-after children's council? Will my hon. Friend ensure that as the "Care Matters" agenda is developed, the voice of the child is heard? It is through listening to those young people that appropriate services can be set up, and their outcomes improved.

Kevin Brennan: Yes, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on her work as president of Blackpool Advocacy, and on all her work down the years on behalf of children in care. It is central to the White Paper and the legislation that the Government will introduce in the new Session that the voice of the child should inform all we do, in local systems as well as individually in their day-to-day experience.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): I applaud the Government's efforts to improve outcomes for children in care, who are badly served by state services at present. Some time ago the Government floated the idea—in fact, I think they intended to introduce it—of sending some of those children to boarding school, either state or private. That idea offers an interesting opportunity. It would give children continuity of care and enable them to make friends, and also offers the prospect for their foster carers in summer to have less time responsibility. Can the Minister update us on the prospects for such placements for some children?

Kevin Brennan: Yes, I can. The principle that will always inform everything we do for children in care is that what is done should be in the best interests of the child. I am sure Members are familiar with that paramount principle. We are piloting some of the ideas to which the hon. Lady referred, and obviously, we shall keep the House informed of progress.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome not only the new team but also the much greater emphasis on children right across the piece. Does my hon. Friend agree that with children in care, as with children throughout the education system, our real problem is that the poorest children have the least spent on their education and care? That is the real challenge that we and his team face over the coming years.

Kevin Brennan: Yes. It is absolutely the mission of the Department to ensure that all children reach their potential, particularly children from the poorest backgrounds. Children in care sometimes do not achieve the outcome that accords with their potential. The principles we shall follow in bringing in the new legislation and implementing the proposals in the White Paper are based on the fact that we have high ambitions for children in care and for the poorest children in the country.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): The Government have caused a number of problems by conflating section 31 and section 20, but will they commit to listening to the voices of children who say that they want to leave care and return to their parents? I know of cases where children have run away from care to go back to their parents, only to be returned time and again. Will the Government start listening to the voices of children who want to return to their parents?

Kevin Brennan: It is the principle the Government follow that wherever possible children should remain with their birth family. It is absolutely legitimate to make criticisms and to look into the issues raised by children in care and adoption, but what is not legitimate is—sometimes in pursuit of a headline in a popular newspaper—to accuse the Government, professionals in the social care sector, local authorities, and indeed the courts, of not trying to act in the best interests of children, which is what the system is designed to do.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Local authorities act in loco parentis for children in care. Will the Minister tell me how he is working with the Department for

Communities and Local Government to ensure that the local area agreements that local authorities are about to develop will have at their heart services and outcomes for our children in care?

Kevin Brennan: Yes, and as I said earlier, when it becomes the responsibility of the state, particularly at local level, to act in loco parentis or to act as a parent in lieu, we should be aiming to act as a parent to the same standard that we would expect from good parents if a child was able to remain with their birth parents. Naturally it is possible for local authorities, where they believe that they need to stretch their performance, to negotiate local area agreements, and obviously that will be a matter for them to decide.

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government's target has been to narrow the gap in achievement between looked-after children and their peers. Is it not therefore a cause for deep concern that just 12 per cent. of looked-after children pass five GCSEs at grade A to C, and that the gap in attainment between children in the care of the state and all other children has widened every year since 2001? The Government have for 10 years failed to get it right for 61,000 looked-after children in this country. With such a record of failure, can the Minister explain why there should be any confidence that he will get it right now, and tackle what has become a deteriorating educational poverty gap for these children?

Kevin Brennan: I thank the hon. Lady—although I was hoping that we might be able to develop a relationship based on consensus around trying to help children in care. Perhaps it is unfortunate that she started off talking about a record of failure, when in fact there has been significant improvement in the educational performance of children in care. For example, between 2000 and 2006 the percentage of children in care obtaining a GCSE has increased from 49 per cent. to 63 per cent., the percentage of those children obtaining five A to Gs has increased from 35 per cent. to 41 per cent. and the percentage obtaining five A to Cs from 7 per cent. to 12 per cent. [HON. MEMBERS: "Twelve per cent.!"] That is not good enough, but it is a significant improvement on the previous position. With the Every Child Matters agenda, with the White Paper and with the legislation that is being introduced, which will include additional financial help for children who are in danger of falling behind in school and who are in care, we are determined to make that better.

Secondary Schools

2. **Mr. Andrew Mackay** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to raise standards in secondary schools. [152579]

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Ed Balls): I start by welcoming the Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Kevin Brennan), to the Front Bench for his first Question Time, and also by welcoming the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) to the Opposition Front Bench for his first questions on this subject.

Standards in secondary schools have risen dramatically over the past decade, with more than 86,000 more pupils now achieving five good GCSEs last year compared with 1997, and 62,000 more achieving five good GCSEs including maths and English. This is as a result of rising investment, a relentless focus on standards, support for teachers and improved discipline, and targeted intervention to tackle poor performance.

Mr. Mackay: In welcoming the Secretary of State to his very important new role, may I urge him to be more flexible in pushing up standards? Surely that means both setting and streaming in every subject in secondary school. When is that going to happen?

Ed Balls: I agree that we need to be flexible, and that means giving teachers and head teachers the flexibility to do the right thing for their children in their schools. I have said that I believe that setting is the right way to go, and setting is rising in our schools, but I have also said that I do not think that selection, either through grammar schools or through grammar streams, would be the right way to go. I think that grammar streams would be divisive. That would be the wrong way to go. I do not think that the Conservative party is right on this subject, but I do think that setting is the right way to go.

Lynda Waltho (Stourbridge) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be aware of the year-on-year improvement in GCSE pass rates and grades from pupils across Dudley. What further progress does he envisage for the pupils of Stourbridge, with the recent announcement of an extra £25 million for the black country learning challenge?

Ed Balls: The standards have been rising in my hon. Friend's constituency, but they have not risen fast enough and we want to do more, and in particular to do more for every child in her constituency. That is why, learning from the London model, we have established a black country challenge to help her and her colleagues to drive up standards in every school in her constituency.

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): There is a growing movement within the education establishment to try to reduce the amount of testing in our secondary, and indeed primary schools. Testing has been an extremely valuable tool in raising standards. Can the Secretary of State give me a categorical assurance that there will be no retreat from testing in our schools?

Ed Balls: I think that it is the Conservative party that has advocated a reduction in testing; that was certainly the previous shadow Minister's view. In my view, testing is essential for parents, for head teachers and for pupils themselves, to be able to track progress. We want to ensure that we test more through the curriculum, but do it in a personalised way that enables us to drive up standards for every child, and to give teachers the information they need to ensure that we drag up poor performance as well as promote excellence. So I can tell the hon. Gentleman from this party that there will be no retreat from the testing agenda.

Mr. Bill Olner (Nuneaton) (Lab): May I too welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position? I am delighted with the way in which standards are being driven up in our secondary schools, but will he place particular emphasis, especially in secondary schools, on encouraging young people to go into the crafts? I am talking about engineering, carpentry, plumbing, electrics and whatever. We are really getting short of such skills, and secondary schools have a big role to play in encouraging people to go into them.

Ed Balls: My hon. Friend is completely right, and we need to make sure that our programme for diplomas for 14 to 19-year-olds both promotes academic excellence and gives people the skills that they need for life—whether for university, for college or for work. Two days ago I visited South Bank university to launch the first engineering diploma, and with the other four diplomas that we are launching in the next couple of weeks, I think that he will see that in the areas he described—related to the built environment—we will both promote learning and give people skills for life. I assure him that this Department will drive forward that vocational agenda in a way that promotes academic excellence.

Mr. David Laws (Yeovil) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to his first question session. In his first statement to the House as Secretary of State, he said that he would make standards rather than structures the priority. In almost his last speech on education, Tony Blair, the previous Prime Minister—if I am still allowed to mention him—said:

"over time I shifted from saying 'it's standards not structures' to realising that schools structures...affect standards."

Could the Secretary of State explain why he has changed the Government's position on that issue since coming to his new post?

Ed Balls: I made it very clear that standards for all children would drive this new Department and I said that it is all about what happens in the classroom, and about backing teachers, but also about backing leadership change in schools when that is needed. That is what our academy programme does. In the end, the test is standards rather than simply structural change for its own sake, so I am clear that standards are the ultimate test of our policy. I say to the hon. Gentleman and to all Members of the House that when shadow Ministers say:

"Academic selection entrenches advantage, it does not spread it",

they are making the case for why we reject structural change through grammar schools in favour of an agenda of standards for all in our country.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Is not a major factor in success in secondary schools excellence in leadership? Will my right hon. Friend give his commitment to the support and training for head teachers and senior management teams? Does he agree that we must never overlook the very valuable contribution made to good leadership in our schools by the massive army of unpaid school governors?

Ed Balls: My hon. Friend is completely right. The voluntary work done by governors contributes hugely to the leadership agenda that I have spoken about. It is also about teachers, head teachers and the support staff who play a valuable role in the classroom every day in our schools. Backing leadership in every classroom by recognising the professionalism of every teacher and every support worker is essential so that head teachers and governors can do their job and deliver for all the pupils in their area.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State and his ministerial team to their places for their first Question Time? And may I say how much I look forward to working with him, with his team—and, indeed, with the Liberal Democrats—to advance the cause of pragmatic reform wherever possible?

In his first statement to the House, the Secretary of State said that his priority would be core subjects such as maths and science. That is a priority that Conservative Members share—but can he tell me how many students are now taking A-level maths and physics compared with 10 years ago?

Ed Balls: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I am concerned by the fact that the number of A-level pupils doing physics has gone down—although I am pleased to see that the number of pupils doing physics GCSE has gone up. Since 1997 the number of pupils doing one science GCSE has risen from 87 per cent. to 92 per cent. and the number of students doing the single science GCSE has gone from 9 per cent. to 11 per cent. We are laying the foundations in the GCSE curriculum to promote more science. We are delivering, but there is more to be done in order to deliver more A-level students, and I am happy to work with the hon. Gentleman to make that happen.

Michael Gove: The answer was a simple sum; we did not need an extended essay. There are now 15 per cent. fewer students taking physics A-level and 7 per cent. fewer taking maths—something that the Secretary of State ignored. A quarter of state secondary schools have no physics teacher, and fewer than half our maths teachers have maths degrees. As Winston Churchill might have said, if he was still in the curriculum, "Never in the field of maths and physics have so many been taught so little by so few." How does the Minister explain that failure?

Ed Balls: I have just said that our performance in science GCSEs has been going up, not down. I have also said that I am happy to work with the hon. Gentleman to make sure that we do more. In my statement to the House a couple of weeks ago, I said that I wanted a national consensus on driving standards up for all children. I have also said that there are things that we have to do to make that happen. We should raise the level of state school spending to the private school level. We should raise the education-leaving age to 18. We should promote excellence for all students, not just some in a grammar stream. We should roll out our extended schools programme and our Sure Start programme to every area in the country. I want a consensus with the hon. Gentleman on these matters. I know that this is difficult for him—there are difficulties on these issues; I understand that. As he said himself:

"in their reluctance to endorse any of these schemes the Conservatives are left embarrassingly mute"—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is not the responsibility of the Minister.

Sex and Relationship Education

3. **Chris McCafferty** (Calder Valley) (Lab): If he will remove the right of schools and parents to absent children from sex and relationship education within personal, health and social education; and if he will make a statement. [152580]

The Minister for Schools and Learners (Jim Knight): We want to see an improvement in sex and relationship education in schools, particularly following the Youth Parliament's helpful report on this subject. We have no plans to remove the right of parents to withdraw their children from all or part of the sex and relationship education that is delivered within the personal, social and health education curriculum. We believe that that right is essential to accommodate different beliefs on what can, for some parents, be a very sensitive issue.

Chris McCafferty: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I wonder whether he is aware that according to the FPA, Marie Stopes and other organisations that work with young people on sexual health, education and services, it is the young people—especially girls—who need this information most who are the most likely to be withdrawn.

Jim Knight: Certainly we need to pay close attention not only to what the FPA says, but to what my hon. Friend says. She has been a long-standing tireless campaigner in this area and her remarks carry considerable weight. We do need to do better in this area. We want to build on the 6,000 nurses and teachers who have undertaken the training programme for PSHE. We will monitor how the new flexibility in the secondary curriculum is used and we will monitor the new PSHE curriculum. We will also watch how the requirement for all schools to become healthy schools—including by following on guidance on sex and relationships education—improves outcomes for young people. If all those measures do not work, we will certainly have to review the decision on the statutory status and the matters that my hon. Friend has raised.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Given the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, especially among teenagers, is the Minister confident that the current teaching in schools is adequate, especially given the scarce resources in primary care trusts and hospital trusts, which obviously have to pick up the bill for STDs?

Jim Knight: We share the concern about sexually transmitted diseases and we take very seriously the improvements needed in teaching. That is why it is important that 6,000 teachers and nurses have been through the continuous professional development programme, and why that number is growing. It is also why it is important that, as part of healthy school status, we should include as one of the four pillars personal, social and health education—and sex and relationship education within that. As I just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty), if the measures do not work on a voluntary basis, we will have to go back and revisit the decision on statutory education.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty). Does the Minister realise that if those girls, in particular, are withdrawn from the classes, it will be yet another layer of discrimination against them, on top of, say, the fact that many of them start school with no English? There was a programme produced by "File on 4", I think last week, which claimed that in 2005, 250 girls aged 13 to 15 were removed from schools in the Bradford district, which includes my constituency.

Jim Knight: My hon. Friend has been assiduous in raising concerns on behalf of her constituents about outcomes in Keighley and Bradford in general, particularly for girls. We need to ensure that schools work closely with parents and the community. Schools need to be sensitive to the beliefs of people in their constituencies, but they also need to ensure that they are getting the right outcomes for everybody. That is what we expect from all schools, regardless of their circumstances, but there is a balance to be struck by head teachers and governors on the ground.

Sure Start (York)

4. **Hugh Bayley** (City of York) (Lab): How many children and families have been supported by Sure Start in York since the programme's inception. [152581]

The Minister for Children, Young People and Families (Beverley Hughes): City of York had one Sure Start local programme, which opened in November 2002, covering a catchment area in which there were 598 children under four. The latest figures, from March 2006, indicate that on average the programme saw 20 per cent. of those children each month. In July, the programme was designated as a Sure Start children's centre, providing services for 750 under-fives.

Hugh Bayley: There are 9,000 children in York under the age of five. By April next year, the programme will have provided eight children's centres, offering support for 6,200 children. Is the Government's plan to roll out the scheme so that all children can receive the services of children's centres, and if so, what is the timetable for delivering that?

Beverley Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know that he is a strong champion of the Sure Start programme in his area. Under phase 2, York is set to receive £1.7 million of revenue and £3.2 million of capital in total to support the development of the seven other centres. The Government's target is for every community to have a Sure Start children's centre by 2010, and as he rightly says, they make an important difference, initially to the most disadvantaged children, and ultimately to all children.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): I believe that the programme's first children's centre recently opened in New Earswick, which is in the city of York part of the Vale of York. Does the right hon. Lady

accept that that centre shows that children's centres can work very effectively with the private sector, which offers nursery places independently? I understand that York will pilot the next stage of the free entitlement to nursery places. Will she use it as a role model, and accept that there should be a free economy as far as the free entitlement to nursery places is concerned, in York and the rest of the country?

Beverley Hughes: I am glad that in her question, the hon. Lady recognises, as she has not done before, that the private sector plays an important and substantial role in the development of children's centres. The scheme is far from being about state provision: the child care offered by 58 per cent. of children's centres is provided not by the state but by the private sector. As she says, that is the case in the New Earswick centre, which is to be designated this autumn. That applies, too, to the free entitlement for three and four-year-olds. We want to retain that mixed economy; overall, we think that it is a great strength. We want local authorities to support private and voluntary providers and to sustain their provision.

Language Units

5. **John Bercow** (Buckingham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the closure of language units attached to mainstream schools; and if he will ensure that full consultation with affected parties is required before such closures may be implemented. [152582]

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Ed Balls): Improving provision of speech and language therapy is a key priority for my new Department. When a maintained mainstream school has a set number of places in a unit reserved for children with language difficulties, statutory procedures have to be followed before units making such provision can be closed. The process involves preliminary consultation, and then, depending on the outcome, the publication of notices, allowing six weeks for objection or comment. Final decisions may then be reached locally, taking account of consultation responses and objections.

John Bercow: I thank the Secretary of State for that helpful reply, and I declare an interest, both as a vice-president of the charity Afasic, and as the parent of a child who is in a language unit—which, I am pleased to say, is not threatened with closure, and is doing an excellent job. Given that parents in Oxfordshire, Surrey and East Sussex have expressed concern about their local language units facing the threat of summary closure, without provision of comparable quality having been made elsewhere, will the Secretary of State accept that the Government need urgently and publicly to remind local education authorities of their responsibilities, and parents of their rights? Will he simply undertake to monitor the number, size and location of language units across the country, in the interests of some of our most vulnerable children?

Ed Balls: I am happy to make that commitment and to make clear to local authorities their responsibilities, as I have set out. I know that the hon. Gentleman has personal experience, and also a campaigning track record, in this field. I met him and the chief executive of Afasic a few months ago. I am happy to look into the issues that he raises and for my officials to work with him and Afasic to look at the particular cases that he raises. It is important that a proper consultation should occur. I will make sure that that happens, and monitor what is happening across the rest of the country as well. More generally, if we are to address the needs of these children to make sure that they have opportunities and to prevent problems in later life, it is essential that effective speech and language therapy is provided in the early years and through school. I will commit to doing everything I can to make that happen.

INNOVATION, UNIVERSITIES AND SKILLS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Science and Innovation

14. **Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the progress made on the Government's 10-year strategy on science and innovation published in 2004. [152563]

16. **Mr. Michael Clapham** (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): If he will make a statement on the progress made on the Government's 10-year strategy on science and innovation published in 2004. [152565]

The Minister for Science and Innovation (Ian Pearson): It is a pleasure to open the first Question Time on the work of the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. The Government published their third annual report on the science and innovation investment framework on Monday. The report shows that over the past year there has been continued good progress in implementing the Government's challenging vision for science and innovation.

Dr. Blackman-Woods: I, too, welcome the appointment of the Secretary of State and his ministerial team to the new Department and to its first Question Time. Can the Minister say what the Government are doing to ensure that the expertise in British universities, such as the excellent Durham university in my constituency, is applied by industries so that jobs can be created in Durham and elsewhere? Does he accept that the proposed energy technologies institute provides a good model for that, and that the institute should come to the north-east?

Ian Pearson: There has been a massive change in the links between our universities and the business community over the past decade. As a Government, we have more than doubled the science budget and we have invested heavily in encouraging university-business links. I applaud Durham university for the work that it does. The energy technologies institute is important for the future of the United Kingdom. If we are to tackle climate change successfully, we need to invest in low carbon technologies for the future. The decisions about its location will be taken in due course by the board. My hon. Friend will know that five

shortlisted consortiums have been bidding to host the hub of the energy technologies institute. We expect that decisions on its location will be taken in September.

Mr. Clapham: I welcome the new ministerial team to their positions. My hon. Friend is aware that when the science and innovation paper was published in 2004, the objective was to increase investment in research and development over 10 years, from 1.9 per cent. of gross domestic product to 2.5 per cent. so that we would be second only to America in the world. From what he said, it sounds as if we are on track, but can he confirm that we will reach that point by 2014, and can he say whether the private sector is fulfilling its commitment to match the investment by the public sector? If we are to compete in the global economy, we need a substantial science-based economy.

Ian Pearson: My hon. Friend raises an important point about targets. The 2.5 per cent. R and D target remains. It is very much an input measure, and I am at least as interested in the quality of R and D as I am in its quantity. The figures are improving. Business R and D was £13.5 billion in 2005. It has been increasing in real terms, but as our GDP has been increasing as well, the situation has become quite stationary. It is important that we continue to invest in the science base. The Government can rightly be proud of the investment that we have put into science and scientific research over the past 10 years. Making sure that we maximise the benefits of that for the economy and for society is a key priority for us and will remain so over the next months and years.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): Although it is encouraging to see the science and innovation portfolio in such competent hands, does the Minister understand my concern as Chairman of the Trade and Industry Committee—that is still its name for a few more weeks—that changes to the machinery of Government risk breaking some of the important links between science and innovation and business, owing to the portfolio being moved away from the business-facing Department? What reassurance can he give me that those links will be maintained?

Ian Pearson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He knows me well, and he knows that I will never forget the importance of the links between universities, science and business. I categorically assure him that the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills will work closely with the new Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to ensure that we have a successful economy in the future. Competitive advantage is, in part, down to our ability to translate our world-class research into new products and processes and to achieve the maximum commercial advantage from that. It is vital that we work closely with industry, and we will do exactly that.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): May I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to his new post, as I did when I saw him in the Select Committee? Have the Government had any further thoughts about how to encourage for the science and innovation framework the promotion of careers in science for young people, especially given the relatively poor salary progression that afflicts researchers and the problems faced by indebted graduates, especially women, seeking to make their way in science careers?

Ian Pearson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question and for his comments; he has highlighted an important issue. The Government are keen to promote the message that there is a valuable career in research. Over the past 10 years, the number of researchers has increased significantly. Applications for science, technology, engineering and mathematics at undergraduate level have recently increased by more than 10 per cent., which is an encouraging sign that more people are applying to study those subjects at university. Making sure that people continue with and progress in careers in research and science is also important, if we are going to make sure that we have a research community that supports our business community and that achieves high growth for the future, which we all want to see.

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North-West) (Lab/Co-op): What actions have the Government taken to improve and generate new business links with my local university, the university of the West of England, and my neighbouring university, the university of Bristol?

Ian Pearson: Both the university of the West of England and Bristol university have benefited from the higher education innovation fund, which is one of the initiatives that the Government have introduced to promote innovation and university business links. There has been a massive change in our universities from 10 years ago in terms of technology transfer, the number of people working in the area and the number of academics who are working closely with business. That is one of our key strengths, and I believe that the Government can do more to encourage university business links not only in universities in my hon. Friend's area, but more broadly. That must be part of our mission as a new Department.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his new role. I understand the urge for Ministers to focus only on Government successes by quoting figures selectively, but we have faith, and we hope that the new Minister will resist that urge in his reply. The Government consistently tell us how well they are doing in achieving their goals on science and innovation in society, but equally consistently, despite the many targets, schemes, reviews, reports, initiatives and interventions over their long period in office, the evidence shows a continued decline in the number of STEM graduates—why?

Ian Pearson: We always have to select statistics, because we cannot use all of them. The hon. Gentleman might want me to read out a few pages of statistics, virtually all of which point in the right direction—that of progress and improvements as regards links between universities and business, research and development, numbers of citations, spin-out companies, and licensing of intellectual property. That is all good news. Yes, he is right that we want more people to do science subjects at A-level and in our universities. That is something on which we will

continue to work closely with the new Department, DCSF, and it will be a priority for us for the future. I apologise for the use of acronyms, Mr. Speaker, but I had forgotten exactly what the Department was called.

National Qualifications Record System

15. **Martin Linton** (Battersea) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had on an online national qualifications record system. [152564]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. David Lammy): Ministers have regular conversations with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, and sometimes those conversations relate to the qualifications infrastructure.

Martin Linton: I welcome my hon. Friend to his first Question Time, and I welcome the new Department, which I am sure that many will see as a DIUS ex machina. I fully support the moves towards a national qualification records system, but I urge him to consider the alternative, whereby instead of having a central Government database, we have a user-centred approach in which each person keeps their own qualifications on a secure site where they can be authenticated by a third party such as an employer and can include not only school and university qualifications but professional and private qualifications from this country and abroad. That has wide support in the industry. Surely it is better for each individual to have ownership of their own qualifications than just to set up a central Government database.

Mr. Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of individual ownership of qualifications. That is why we are shortly to trial the unique identification number. He has taken a big interest in this issue, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education wrote to him about it in January. I am happy to meet him to discuss it further, but he already knows that we have taken the decision to trial the unique identification number without the broker system.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post and wish him well. Will he undertake one piece of qualifications research before we come back in October by trying to establish how many people are qualified to teach a broad history curriculum in our schools rather than merely concentrating on Nazi Germany, so that our children can emerge from school properly qualified in a knowledge of their own history?

Mr. Lammy: I will miss my exchanges with the hon. Gentleman on culture. I know of his long-standing interest in our heritage and in history, which, in a sense, we share. On his question, I will have to leave that to my colleagues in the Department for Children, Schools and Families, but I will explore those issues in relation to adult education.

Careers Advice (Adults)

17. **Mr. Neil Gerrard** (Walthamstow) (Lab): What support is available for adults in need of advice on career opportunities. [152567]

The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. John Denham): Last week, we set out our ambition of creating a universal adult careers service incorporating the Learndirect and Nextstep advice services and working closely with Jobcentre Plus. Currently, every adult who needs free careers information and advice can seek it through the national Learndirect telephone and online service, through local Nextstep face-to-face advice services, or from their local college or training provider.

Mr. Gerrard: It is important that people have access to the sort of advice that they need. I ask my right hon. Friend to look in particular at liaison with the Department for Work and Pensions because it is at that point where, very often, people are not directed to the places to which they need to be directed. It is all very well having the services that he describes, but what really matters is ensuring that people know those services are there, and that they can access them.

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and there will be the closest possible co-operation between Jobcentre Plus and the new careers service. Indeed, in many cases they will be co-located. For too long, the problem has been that one Department has focused on getting people into work and the other on developing their skill levels. That produces a set of people who go into work and then come back out again in a few months, without having their skill levels raised. I hope that one of the effects of the collaboration between the two Departments will be that we meet individual skill needs as people move into work, therefore increasing their chances of staying in work and getting a better job.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Is the Minister aware of the contribution that science centres make in encouraging young adults to take up a career in science? Why is it that in the United States and France those are being pursued vigorously, while in Britain they have been subject to indifference and interdepartmental squabbling?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. After a few weeks in this job, my reflection is that we have quite a wealth of places throughout the country—local centres, national science museums, science centres and so on—that provide opportunities for young people to be exposed to science and have their interest stimulated. However, there is not necessarily the best guidance on where to find them, or co-ordination of the services that they offer. I suspect we could do a lot better by having a more coherent approach to promoting the good facilities that already exist.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will realise that the best career advice may encourage people to re-route their skills pattern. Does he not find it ironic, as I do, that we can pay someone to stop at home, but if they do more than 16 hours a

week on a college course, they lose their benefit? Has he considered any approach to getting around this blockage, which prevents people from advancing their career by reskilling?

Mr. Denham: We must be careful that we do not undo all the rules of the benefit system, which are there for a reason. However, my hon. Friend will know from the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions last week, that increasingly the approach of Jobcentre Plus will be to build the acquisition of skills into the service we provide to people who are looking for work, so that there is a much clearer process of identifying skills needs and dealing with them.

My right hon. Friend wants to look at the current situation where someone can be out of work for six months before they get access to skills training. If someone has lost their job again because they did not have sufficient skills, there is clearly a case for getting them into adequate skills training straight away, not waiting for six months, as can happen at the moment.

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): Does the Secretary of State realise that, for an adult who has been out of work and out of the job market for some time, the step of accessing careers advice can be a very big one indeed? For some of those people, so-called leisure courses can be a vital step in boosting their confidence so that they can get back into the job market and take the step of accessing advice. Does he intend to continue with the current policy of axing many of those courses to target money elsewhere?

Mr. Denham: I recognise that there is a group of people for whom there can be an important stage of getting back into learning before they start a full-time vocational course. However, we have to be straightforward and say that we cannot justify all of the leisure provision that may exist at the moment on the basis that some people will find their way through. Although they have their own intrinsic value, the record shows that many people do not find them to be stepping stones to further qualifications. We have to look carefully at the system and the types of provision that are shown to provide a good stepping stone and progression into effective future learning. We must ensure that our resources prioritise those areas of activity.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Given that 30 years on from equal pay legislation, many young women, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, still gravitate towards training and job opportunities that tend to limit their future potential earning capacity—particularly when compared with their male counterparts—what steps will my right hon. Friend take, along with right hon. and hon. Friends from other Departments, to ensure that those who are likely to influence young women's choices encourage them to broaden the range of training and job opportunities that they consider, as has been suggested by the YWCA's "More than one rung" campaign?

Mr. Denham: I am aware of the work of the "More than one rung" campaign. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and members of the campaign to discuss in detail the way in which the changes that we are introducing can meet the needs that she identified. I hope that the changes to Jobcentre Plus, the development of the adult career service and the possibilities that local employer partnerships are opening up, whereby guaranteed routes are offered into work, will contribute to broadening the range of possibilities. However, I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and members of the campaign to go through that in more detail.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Government's imitation of our advocacy of a new careers service may be the sincerest form of flattery, but if the Secretary of State had examined our policy more closely, he would realise that we proposed a dedicated, all-age careers service. The House of Lords Select Committee that considered the matter recently described a

"failure of careers guidance services".

Young people do not get the information that they need about apprenticeships or basic information about local labour markets and career opportunities. Why does not the Secretary of State agree that an all-age career service, running alongside Connexions, is vital to tackling the growing army of hapless 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training?

Mr. Denham: I certainly agree that we need effective careers advice. The hon. Gentleman will find that I first set out my ideas for an adult careers service in a Fabian pamphlet about three years ago, so I will not allow him to claim authorship.

The range of issues that young people face, especially when they make their initial careers choices, are sufficiently different to make it better to have a separately organised careers service for younger people. However, we do not differ on the principle that, at every stage in somebody's life, there should be access to good careers advice that can meet individual, particular needs. I hope that we will not fall out over organisation when we clearly agree about the principle.

Technology Transfer

18. **Mr. Andy Reed** (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on the Government's support for technology transfer arrangements. [152568]

The Minister for Science and Innovation (Ian Pearson): The Government are strongly committed to technology transfer from the research base. We support technology transfer in both universities and public laboratories, for example, through the higher education innovation fund. That has delivered significant improvements in the past 10 years.

Mr. Reed: My hon. Friend knows from his discussions with companies such as Intelligent Energy, which grew out of Loughborough university, that they are massively successful and will, hopefully, provide world-class energy technology facilities through fuel cell technology. He will be pleased to know that universities have said that the higher education innovation fund is working mainly in the right way and that they support it. However, there are a few minor

tweaks and amendments that they would like, for example, to the little gap in the pre-venture capital stage in innovation, and longer-term funding to allow staff from industry to be based in universities for longer. Will my hon. Friend meet me and representatives of other universities throughout the country, who would like some minor improvements, which would make an enormous difference to a track record that is already pretty good?

Ian Pearson: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and anybody he wants to bring along to discuss the matter. He is right to recognise the importance of the higher education innovation fund. Since the start of this century, we have invested more than £500 million in promoting university business links through the fund. We might need to do some tweaking for the next stage of the fund and we are considering moving further away from the bidding aspect to a formulaic approach. We have already consulted widely, but I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Adult Education

19. **Mr. Christopher Fraser** (South-West Norfolk) (Con): What change there has been in the number of adult learning courses in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [152570]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. David Lammy): We do not collect information on the number of courses offered by providers. Last week, we published "World Class Skills", our plan for implementing the Leitch review, which restates the importance of focusing on longer courses such as full level 2 courses and new training opportunities for those in employment through the train to gain programme.

Mr. Fraser: Can the Minister explain to the House the difference between prioritising the "most beneficial learning" and cutting adult education courses? Is that not just another way of saying that the Government are forcing colleges to divert funding away from adult education?

Mr. Lammy: No it is not. The Government are committed to the recommendations made by the Foster and Leitch reviews. That is why, quite rightly, we want to ensure that people are on longer courses, as I set out in my reply. I remind the hon. Gentleman of our commitments in skills for life, of the tremendous work that our union learning reps do up and down the country and of our commitment to ensuring that the most disadvantaged and the poorest get those basic skills, so that they can take part in the economy in the way that we want.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his new post. I also welcome the fact that he cited Lord Leitch's report, which said:

> "There is a pressing need to raise the rates of skills improvements among adults—the UK cannot reach a world class ambition by 2020 without this."

Will the Minister confirm that nearly 1 million places for adults in FE colleges have been lost in the past five years? That is nearly half of all places for adult learning lost. The Secretary of State dismisses those courses as belly dancing and basket weaving, but I am sure that we can all agree that these are deeply enjoyable and worthwhile activities. Moreover, many of the courses are not just belly dancing and basket weaving; they are valuable in helping older workers to enhance their skills and improve their job opportunities. Why does the Minister say that he agrees with Leitch and that he values adult learning, but meanwhile undermines it?

Mr. Lammy: I do not recognise the figure that the hon. Gentleman uses, and I am trying not to recognise the allusions that he brings to mind. I remind him that the proportion of people in adult learning has increased to 80 per cent., from 76 per cent. just two years ago. Either he supports the Leitch recommendations and what we are doing to try to ensure that employers are close to our FE colleges and providers or, he does not. He cannot have it both ways.

Vocational Training

21. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the take-up of vocational training. [152572]

The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. John Denham): I can report that the latest figures show that the number of national and Scottish vocational qualifications awarded continues to rise, up 36 per cent. since 1997. Our wider strategy for vocational training was set out in "World Class Skills", the Command Paper published last week.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that reasonable and helpful reply. Does he not accept, however, that once the basics of education—reading, writing, numeracy, expression and comprehension—have been fully grasped by young people, it would be better to introduce vocational training much earlier in education? That would give them a real motivation and a real sense of what they might want to do when they go into the world of work.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman has had a long interest in such issues, particularly in relation to the manufacturing industry, and he makes an important point. However, as he will have heard in the earlier question session, that is precisely why the new diploma for engineering was unveiled this week and why another four diplomas will be published in the next couple of weeks. We want the option of taking a diploma, starting at the age of 14, to be seen as a valid route for young people. I do not want us to lose sight of the importance of apprenticeships, either. The noble Lord Leitch set a target for the United Kingdom of 500,000 people in apprenticeships by 2020. Apprenticeships should also be seen as a relevant, valid and valued choice for young people.

Anglo-Chinese Co-operation

22. **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to promote closer partnerships in teaching and research between English and Chinese universities. [152574]

The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. John Denham): The Government support numerous initiatives to promote closer partnerships with China. Following the Prime Minister's initiative, more than 50,000 Chinese students are currently studying in the UK. The UK-China partners in science initiative identifies potential areas of research collaboration and funds networking between scientists. The research councils will shortly open their first overseas office in Beijing. Our relationship is highly productive. In 2005, this country published more papers jointly with Chinese authors than any other European Union country.

Mr. Sheerman: Does my right hon. Friend accept that, on the Select Committee's recent visit to universities in China, we found a great willingness to engage in serious participation, both at student level and, much more seriously, involving partnerships that really add value for both sides? One senior president of a university told the Select Committee that we could double the research budgets of British universities through closer collaboration and greater emphasis on senior and progressive work.

Mr. Denham: I am interested in my hon. Friend's reflections on his visit. I shall be going to China myself at the end of October to help to promote links between our universities and those in China. There are already more than 150 collaborative projects in place between universities here and in China, but if the scope for expanding those links is as great as my hon. Friend suggests, we must clearly do everything that we can to take advantage of them.

Business of the House

11.30 am

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business of the House following the recess?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): The business for the week commencing 8 October will be:

MONDAY 8 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill.

TUESDAY 9 OCTOBER—A debate on defence procurement on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

WEDNESDAY 10 OCTOBER—Opposition Day [19th allotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 11 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Greater London Authority Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Further Education and Training Bill *[Lords]*, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

FRIDAY 12 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 15 October will include:

MONDAY 15 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Legal Services Bill *[Lords]*.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall on 11 and 18 October will be:

THURSDAY 11 OCTOBER—A debate on the report from the Foreign Affairs Committee on human rights.

THURSDAY 18 OCTOBER—A debate on the management and services of the House of Commons.

All hon. Members have a right to hold Ministers to account during the summer recess, either by tabling parliamentary questions for answer in September or by writing to the Secretary of State concerned. In addition, hon. Members whose constituencies have been affected by flooding need to know that Ministers will keep them updated on a regular basis. I have therefore asked my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for Communities and Local Government to write to those Members of Parliament whose constituencies are affected on a regular basis. Both my right hon. Friends will also hold a weekly telephone conference, on a Monday, to enable all those hon. Members whose constituencies have been affected by floods to be kept informed and to question the Minister concerned during the recess.

Finally, I should also like to thank the staff of the House for their continued support to all hon. Members, and the staff in the Departments who provide briefings for the weekly business statement.

Mrs. May: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for giving us the future business. May I take this opportunity to wish you, Mr. Speaker, all right hon. and hon. Members, and officers and staff of the House, a very enjoyable summer recess?

This week, we have had two statements from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the dreadful floods that have hit central and southern England and caused misery for thousands of people. We are grateful that he has kept the House and the relevant Members informed, and I am also grateful for the announcement that the Leader of the House has just made about the provisions for keeping Members whose constituencies are affected, including myself, in touch with developments over the summer recess. There are still questions to be answered, however, on the use of temporary barriers, and on why the Environment Agency has stopped regularly dredging rivers. When Parliament returns from the summer recess, may we have a debate on the flooding and the lessons to be learned from the recent floods?

Last month, the Modernisation Committee produced its report on enhancing the role of the Back Bencher. It contained excellent proposals and, if Parliament is to be strengthened, it should be implemented quickly. When will the right hon. and learned Lady bring those proposals before the House?

Three weeks ago, the Leader of the House said that she would do everything that she could

"to protect the rights of Back Benchers, to hold the Government to account".—[*Official Report*, 5 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1091.]

Yesterday, she failed in her pledge when she abandoned parliamentary procedure in order to put the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) on to the Home Affairs Committee. She put the interests—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Lady, but the House has decided on that matter. We are now debating the business for the week after the recess, so that matter should not be raised again.

Mrs. May: I am grateful for your advice, Mr. Speaker. I was about to ask about a future item of business related to a more general issue. As that was not a matter of putting the interests of the House first, will the right hon. and learned Lady provide the House with a more accurate statement of her interpretation of her role as Leader of the House, and, given that she is also the chairman of the Labour party, will she touch on the duality of her role?

On Monday, the Minister for Housing made a statement on her plans for more housing, but its contents were in the morning's press and a BBC correspondent even had a copy the previous weekend. On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Transport made a statement on the railways, but its contents were debated that very morning on the "Today" programme. Yesterday, the Prime Minister made his statement on the detention of terror suspects, but he had already given the story to *The Sun*. Will the right hon. and learned Lady take time from her other duties to ensure that all of her ministerial colleagues, including the Prime Minister, live up to his promise to announce policy to the House first?

Also on Monday, the Prime Minister insinuated to the media—not to hon. Members—that he would consider reversing the liberalisation of licensing laws. His spin doctors later confirmed that there would be a review of policy. That comes after a half-announcement to review the classification of cannabis and a half-announcement to reverse the super-casinos policy. This is no way to announce policy, so will the Leader of the

[Mrs. May]

House tell the Prime Minister that if he wants to restore Parliament's powers, he should treat hon. Members with respect?

On that same subject, the Prime Minister yesterday sneaked out 39 written statements and answers to five named day questions from Labour MPs. Those included statements on a £3.5 billion shortfall in Child Support Agency payments, plans for the abolition of 25 councils and the failure of the Youth Justice Board. Today, a further 30 written statements are planned, including one on a breach of data security for visa applications, one on the Government's climate change target and one on the cost of ministerial cars. So much for the post-spin era. Will the right hon. and learned Lady make a statement on that abuse of written ministerial statements?

Finally, the European Council conclusions state:

"National parliaments shall contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union".

The Labour Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee has said:

"This is a takeover of the rights of this Parliament".

Parliament's representative on the former Convention says:

"The case for a referendum is even stronger now".

The right hon. and learned Lady says that she understands her duty to Parliament, so after the recess, will she make a statement on the consequences of the treaty for this sovereign Parliament?

Ms Harman: The right hon. Lady raised the matter of the use of temporary barriers for the floods. That was dealt with by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in an oral statement. He said that the siting of the equipment for these temporary barriers needed to be looked into further and that when that was done, he would report back to the House. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed that yesterday.

As to the important work of the Modernisation Committee on enhancing the role of the Back Bencher and the House, we will report back on our set of proposals for the Chamber in the autumn.

The right hon. Lady raised a point about the housing statement made by the Minister for Housing. She will know that the question of how an early version of that statement was leaked is to be the subject of a leak inquiry. I strongly believe, however, that policy announcements should be made to the House first. It is very important that Back Benchers come into the Chamber knowing that they are going to hear an announcement, and that they on behalf of their constituents, and the House on behalf of the country, are able to hold Ministers to account. We must ensure that there is both general discussion in the media, in public meetings and in our constituencies, and that specific information is announced to the House first.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the review of the policy on cannabis. Bearing in mind the evidence of the greater strength of cannabis, and new evidence of links between cannabis use and serious mental health problems, especially among the young, it is good that we are reviewing the policy and that the Prime Minister should announce that to Parliament when responding to questions. *[Interruption.]* The Prime Minister has made two, or three, oral statements already since becoming Prime Minister— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Members will let the Leader of the House speak.

Ms Harman: The right hon. Lady and hon. Members can hardly say that the Prime Minister has not made enough oral statements to the House—he has made two or three. It is important that the House is told that we are going to review the classification of cannabis, and that is what he did.

It will not be news to any Member that a deadlock has been reached between this House and the other place on the super-casino question. In view of that, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was right to say that he is reflecting on the way forward, and that he will use the summer to consider the important question of how areas such as east Manchester and Blackpool should be regenerated.

The right hon. Lady complained about the number of written ministerial statements, but she has not said whether any of those should not have been made. When the summer recess is approaching, Departments must consider whether to look ahead and ensure that a written statement is made to the House, rather than either holding up decisions until October or putting them out to the media during the recess. It is simply a practical matter. If Ministers have reached decisions on important issues, it is right that they do not hold them up until October when the House returns from the recess, and that they get those decisions out through a written statement. Recently, a great many oral statements have been made—two and sometimes three a day—so she cannot be suggesting that more of the written statements should have been turned into oral statements. It is therefore right for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to provide the information on the Child Support Agency in that way. I do not accept for one moment that written statements have been abused.

The right hon. Lady also raised the question of European scrutiny. As I said to her last week when she raised the issue, I have met the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, and we need to consider whether the House can better scrutinise European issues.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate on the quality of and access to Jobcentre Plus services? In the last three years, changes in the delivery of welfare benefits have caused significant disruption and hardship to tens of thousands of claimants, with families waiting weeks for benefits to be processed and telephone systems overwhelmed by call volumes. Centralising the work of the Department for Work and Pensions into a tiny number of mega-centres is hitting the most vulnerable in our land very hard, and an urgent review is necessary.

Ms Harman: I hear the point that my hon. Friend has raised and I will ensure that it is brought to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I reassert and agree with

my hon. Friend that the work of Jobcentre Plus is important. Those who can work should be helped into work and the benefits system is important not only to provide support for those who cannot work, but to top up the pay of those in work to ensure that work pays.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and I join her and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) in thanking those who work for the House and who serve us in preparing for our business. I also join them in wishing everyone a good break; I will come back to the length of it in a moment.

In relation to the business for the first week back after the summer recess, I repeat my request that the Leader of the House should over the summer reflect on the fact that it is inappropriate to start with the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, which we know will get barely any way down the track before we have the end of the parliamentary year, and which will then be amended. I ask her to say that, by agreement over the holiday, that Bill could be taken off the agenda for that Monday. Instead, for example, we could have a debate on the Monday about the consequences of the flooding, because that will be the first opportunity to do so.

On the Tuesday, rather than have a limited defence debate on procurement, we could have a more wide-ranging defence debate on Iraq and Afghanistan. The country would expect, if we have been out of this place for some weeks, that the troops serving abroad and what they are doing for us all should be the subject of scrutiny and review at the earliest possible opportunity, given the danger and importance of what they do.

I request that we add another matter to the business when we come back: the implications of the cuts in rail subsidy. People are encouraged to be environmentally responsible. Some will go on holiday by train. They will have heard that train fares are going up even further because the subsidy is being cut. That is not a popular move and, well before the beginning of the next financial year, and ideally in the first week back, we need to look at the way we pay for the rail industry and the amount that we charge people, because out there in the real world that has a huge impact on the budgets of families who often need to use rail services.

On domestic matters, following what happened yesterday and looking ahead, as the Leader of the House is now on the Modernisation Committee will she reflect on the fact that, if we are to have large numbers of written statements, they should at least do what they say they will do? She gave us a written statement today saying that the Government response to the Modernisation Committee report on petitions and early-day motions would be in the Vote Office, but it was not available when we started this exchange.

May we have an early debate on petitions and early-day motions that have more than 300 signatures—there is an important one on illegal logging and another important one on carers—and may we, as a matter of course, debate motions that have huge support in the House? Lastly, may we have a serious discussion again under the right hon. Lady's leadership as soon as we come back on whether it is justifiable for the House of Commons in the United Kingdom to go away for 10 weeks when the rest of the country, if they are lucky, go away for two or three? We cannot justify it and we need to debate it again. We need to return to the bad decision, in my view, that we made some weeks ago.

Ms Harman: On the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that Sir Ronald Flanagan will be giving his interim report in the summer. That Bill will then be considered in the usual way. If any amendments are to be brought forward by the Government or by hon. Members, the question will be whether they are within the remit of the long title, but I have heard the points that the hon. Gentleman has made and no doubt they will be reflected on by the Home Secretary as well.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there could be a debate on flooding when the House returns. I can assure all hon. Members that the Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will keep the House updated, possibly by way of written or oral statements, but they have come forward with as much information as they possibly can. If there is a need for a debate over and above the statement, no doubt my right hon. Friends will seek such a debate.

There will be a debate on Tuesday 9 October on defence procurement, and that would be an opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to raise the important issue of our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport made a full statement on the railways on Tuesday and I am sure that, like all hon. Members, the hon. Gentleman was pleased to hear that more freight is now going by rail, passenger numbers are up and regulation of fares continues. We all want to see the contribution that the railways can make to tackling climate change stepped up. That is the view across Government.

Hon. Members will know of the suggestion to update the antiquated process that means that petitions have to be in a particular form of words, otherwise they cannot be submitted, and simply get put in the bag behind Mr. Speaker's chair. I thank the Procedure Committee for the important work that it has done on the question of petitioning Parliament. It made many useful suggestions and the Government's response has been published and will be available from the Vote Office by the end of today.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether early-day motions that have attracted great concern could be the subject of a debate once a certain number of Members had signed them. However, it is always open to hon. Members to apply to debate issues on the Adjournment or to seek a Westminster Hall debate.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the question of the House sitting in September has been the subject of experiment, and the House has voted on the issue. I understand that the hon. Gentleman and—I hope—the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) received an advance copy of the document on petitions. It was certainly my intention that they should have an advance copy, but I hope that all hon. Members will be able to obtain a copy from the Vote Office shortly.

Mr. John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): When does the Leader of the House expect to be able to publish the

[Mr. John Spellar]

report by the Senior Salaries Review Body on pay and allowances for Members of Parliament and when will the House be able to debate it?

Ms Harman: The report will be published, and the House will debate it, in the autumn.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): When will the Leader of the House produce the proposals on the new regional Select Committees, and can she tell us whether she intends them to be full Select Committees, where the 99 or 100 Members to man them will be found, what arrangements are being made to resource them and whether the Chairmen will be paid?

Ms Harman: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that it is important that we strengthen the accountability of the work that the Government do in the different regions of England. That is why we have established Ministers responsible for the regions, but we need to complete the process by ensuring the accountability to the House of Departments and the regional Ministers. The question is how we take that forward and we are considering that. We will undertake discussions and then bring forward proposals. We are clear on the principle that regional accountability is important, but we need to think through and discuss further the exact form that it will take, so that it has credibility in the regions and operates effectively in this House in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House made any contingency plans for changing the business when we come back in October in view of all the talk about an early election, given the massive Labour lead and the two brilliant by-election results, which were the best for Labour in office for many years? If we do have an early election, can we fight it on the old parliamentary boundaries, because that would give Labour another 10 seats?

Ms Harman: On the question of elections, I remind the House that it is the anniversary today of the great election triumph of 1945. I also wish to take this opportunity to welcome my two new hon. Friends the Members for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Sharma) and for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson). So many years on from 1945, we are still winning elections.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The Vote Office is helpfully making me a copy of the draft European constitutional treaty, but I understand that it is not readily available and I shall have to read it in French—I shall do my best. It is scandalous that the treaty will be considered by the Government before the autumn, but that it is not available in our own language to Members of Parliament. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the document is translated, printed and made available to all hon. Members immediately?

Ms Harman: The negotiations having been concluded and our negotiating objectives having been achieved, the treaty is still in draft as yet, because detailed work is still under way. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman already has problems with translation, because it is not a constitutional treaty as he suggests. A translation will be available and there will be an opportunity for the House to discuss it.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): May we have a debate about security measures? Last week I applied for a pass for new member of staff and was informed in writing by the Serjeant at Arms that such an application could take longer to process if the applicant had Irish associations. As far as I know, the only Irish association that the applicant might have is with me, as I, like many other hon. Members, am of Irish extraction. Surely security measures should focus on the current potential threat rather than a threat that may have existed in a previous century.

Ms Harman: I know that the Serjeant at Arms, who has responsibility for issuing security passes, tries to ensure that they are made available at the request of hon. Members as quickly as possible. I can remember a time when there was no pass system for the House. The level of threat was so low that people could come in and out of the House without needing a pass, but all hon. Members understand that we now—I regret to say—need effective security measures. As for the point about country of origin, I understand that the Serjeant at Arms undertakes security checks in this country and that foreign nationals also have a security check in their country of origin.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): Yesterday's statement on local government reform included proposals for a stronger tier of government in Cornwall. During the process, Cornwall's MPs were assured that such a structure would be the best way to achieve the longstanding ambition of Cornwall to obtain devolved powers for planning, economic development and other public services that are currently run by unelected agencies in the Government zone of the south-west. As we are now entering the long summer recess, what can the Leader of the House do to ensure that Departments work together to provide Cornwall with a clear document setting out the extent, route map and timetable for devolved powers before irreversible decisions are taken by local authorities?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government tells me that his Department will work with local authorities in Cornwall to take the matter forward. The hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) is right to recognise that we have tried to devolve power from the centre to local authorities, communities and regions. Strong regional economic development is one of the reasons why we have had steady, sustained economic growth.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend find time during the long summer recess to talk to the organisers of the three main parties' annual autumn conferences with a view to trying to break up the three-week block of conferences so that the House can have a more even pattern of sittings and thus a shorter summer recess?

Ms Harman: As I told the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), the House has from time to time changed its September procedures. When conferences are held is not a matter for the House, but for discussion between the parties.

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): After 10 years of Labour Government, the latest figures show that burglary in the city of Peterborough has risen by 36 per cent. and robbery by 44 per cent. Cambridgeshire has the fastest growing population of any county in England and our crime rate is above the English average. When can we have a proper debate in Government time on police authority grants that properly reflect population changes year on year, so that we can get more police on the beat to tackle crime?

Ms Harman: In all areas, including the hon. Gentleman's constituency, there are more police officers, more civilian staff to back them up and more community support officers. No doubt he will join me in thanking all of them for their work in his constituency. The grants have been increased to make that possible.

Mr. Speaker, earlier I said that the Government response on petitions would be in the Vote Office later today. May I put the record straight? In fact, the document has been available in the Vote Office since 11 am.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): Several weeks ago, I raised with my right hon. and learned Friend's predecessor as Leader of the House Britain's serious and growing alcohol problems. I expressed concern about the health problems, especially foetal alcohol syndrome, which is a growing problem as more young women drink a lot more. My right hon. Friend, now the Lord Chancellor, expressed some sympathy with my request for a full debate on the Floor of the House about the whole range of Britain's alcohol problems. Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that it is a possibility?

Ms Harman: It certainly is a possibility. The problem concerns Members on both sides of the House, not only because of the health issues relating to alcohol—my hon. Friend mentioned foetal alcohol syndrome—but also because of crime and disorder. One of the biggest precipitators of domestic violence is excessive drinking. My ministerial colleagues are working seriously on those issues and will no doubt account to the House if they have something to report and want to debate it.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Mr. Speaker, I hope you will allow me to raise two quick matters. The first is in respect of written statements. I shall not use the word abuse, but there is an over-use of written ministerial statements. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made a written statement yesterday about the restructuring of local government in many important parts of the country, not least Cheshire. That should have been subject to a statement in the House to enable Members to question the Secretary of State.

On the responsibilities of the Leader of the House, does not the right hon. and learned Lady think it is time for her to make a statement in the House about the responsibilities of the Modernisation Committee, which she will chair in due course, and the Procedure Committee? There appears to be a blurring of responsibilities and an assumption that the Modernisation Committee should take over matters that I consider are the duties of the Procedure Committee.

Ms Harman: I think it is important that we recognise the different roles of the Modernisation and Procedure Committees although they often work closely together, and I pay tribute to the work of both Committees in making suggestions that have improved the way the House operates. I hope that will continue to be the case.

The hon. Gentleman questioned there being a written statement yesterday on local government issues by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. It is the usual practice for such issues to be dealt with in written statements. Yesterday, we had important oral statements on terrorism and the commissioning of aircraft carriers and it was right that they were oral statements to the House. There is a hierarchy: oral statements and then, if something is not appropriate for an oral statement, written statements. Above all, however, information should be given to the House first.

I am clear in my own mind that it is important for information to be given to the House. It is strange that some Members seem to say that we are having too many written ministerial statements, or indeed too many oral statements. It is a challenge for the business of the House when we want to make important oral and written statements before the House rises, but the most important thing is accountability to the House.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): May we have a debate, or even better a Bill, as soon as the House resumes on allowing the House to stop unlimited spending by parliamentary candidates long before an election is called? That was never permissible before 2000 and is permissible now only due to a loophole in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which was exploited by Lord Ashcroft and many others in the run-up to the 2005 election and is already being exploited in the run-up to the next election. It is urgent that we close the loophole, rather than waiting for a magical consensus on other party funding issues that may never come.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend raises a very important point indeed. The British people want elections to be fair, not bought by unfair funding arrangements. I hope that the work being undertaken between the parties by Sir Hayden Phillips will reach a speedy conclusion. I reassure my hon. Friend that despite the fact that there was a great deal of spending by the Conservatives in the Ealing, Southall election, we won the argument and, therefore, the vote, but his point about party funding is important and I shall bring it to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice.

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Con): Does the Leader of the House think there would be value in a statement, or perhaps an Adjournment debate, on the sensitive and difficult issue the Government face in relation to 60 Sri Lankan citizens awaiting deportation who are on hunger strike? They are clearly concerned about what their treatment will be on return to that country.

Ms Harman: If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary with specific details of the case I am sure she will look at it as soon as possible. There is also the opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to raise it, if he so wishes, in the debate on the Adjournment of the House later today.

Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley) (Lab): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware of the concern felt by many Members about the erratic sitting hours of the House? Does she agree that it is a bit of a dog's breakfast and, given that Members elected post-'97 have never had an opportunity to debate the issue, will she find time for such a debate in the autumn?

Ms Harman: The sitting hours of the House are important. Obviously, we need to ensure—especially on Mondays—that Members of Parliament in far-flung constituencies can travel to the House in time for the start of business. I can remember when the House regularly sat throughout the night and I assure Members that it did not enhance scrutiny or opposition one bit. My view on sitting hours is a matter of record. No doubt, they will continue to be a matter for discussion and my hon. Friend rightly raises that point.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): Just in case that, when the House returns in October, the most unfortunate prisoner early release scheme is still in place, can the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Justice comes to the Dispatch Box and makes a further statement on it? He might well wish to address a constituent of mine, a serving police officer who, while off duty, was viciously assaulted in one of our local medical centres, only to find that the person who committed that horrible crime had just been released early. I do not think that that police officer, who risks his life day in, day out, quite understands what is going on.

Ms Harman: I express my sympathy to that victim of crime from the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. I ask him to bear in mind, though, that one of the things that militates against the rehabilitation of offenders, and which therefore makes it more difficult to prevent reoffending is if the prison regime is not able to do the work with those offenders while they are in prison because there is a problem of overcrowding. I think that all Members in the House would understand that. The early release scheme is only available for prisoners who are serving less than four years and who are within 18 days of release anyway. *[Interruption.]* I have said that there are certain categories of serious violent crime, such as grievous bodily harm, malicious wounding and homicide, where even if the person is serving a sentence of less than four years, they would not be eligible for the early release scheme; otherwise, if the courts have seen fit to give a person a sentence of less than four years and that person is within 18 days of release, they can be released 18 days early.

I hope that hon. Members think sensibly about this. Obviously we want lower repeat offending and that means that we must focus as much as we can on rehabilitating those who have been sent to prison.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): In the United States of America increasing sums are being spent on higher education, and that is not just from the Government but from private sources. In the developing world, places like India and China are also spending huge sums on higher education. May we have an early debate on how the British Government can support UK universities in the competing global economy, to ensure that our universities remain as successful as they have always been?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Education is important for individuals' personal development and it is absolutely essential to our success in a globalised economy, so I will draw it to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mr. Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute) (LD): May we have an urgent statement on the postal workers' dispute? The strike is causing great damage not only to Royal Mail but to small businesses and other people who are heavily dependent on Royal Mail. Management and the unions are not even talking to one another. Will the Government, as a matter of urgency, intervene in the dispute and get both sides round the negotiating table in meaningful talks? Perhaps it is time for a return to beer and sandwiches at No. 10.

Ms Harman: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out the Government's position on that yesterday. We hope that there will be a successful conclusion to this dispute, to save further damaging consequences not only for residential users of the mail but for small businesses.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend arrange for an early debate on occupational health and safety? She may be aware that the Health and Safety Executive will today release its figures for last year on occupational health and safety, which are expected to show an increase in deaths; in fact the construction industry is expecting that they will show that deaths in construction have increased by about 30 per cent. She will also be aware that since 2000 there have been 200 fewer inspectors, and if the comprehensive spending review imposition is accepted by the Department for Work and Pensions, it follows that year on year we could lose another 700 inspectors. It is important that we have an early debate on health and safety.

Ms Harman: I will draw it to the attention of my right hon. Friends. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the all-party group on occupational health and safety, which my hon. Friend chairs, and to recognise the contribution that he, as a Member of the House, has made to bringing before the House, and soon into legislation, the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill. I recognise the important work that still needs to be done on safety in the construction industry.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): May we have an early debate on the freedom of expression? We all uphold the right of protest, which is an integral part of our democracy, but under cover of the right of protest, 100 yd from here, we now have a permanent disfigurement, right in the heart of our capital, in the form of an encampment of tents. Is this not an abuse of the right of protest?

Ms Harman: It is a difficult balance to protect important heritage sites—which is what Parliament square is; an important tourist location—and the ability of the House to go about its business not unduly disturbed by a great deal of noise and shouting through loudspeakers, while at the same time allow the right to protest. It is a subject that is regularly considered by the House.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I am the proud honorary unpaid adviser to the Port of Tilbury Police Federation, of which I think there are 16 members. I raise that in the context of yesterday's welcomed announcement that we are going to have a uniformed border force. May I urge the Leader of the House, before the legislation comes before the House, to use her good offices to ensure that the Port of Tilbury police and the other small police forces, which were privatised by a Conservative Government, are consulted, not just about their individual futures, because they could guide this new force on best practice? I also counsel caution that successive Home Secretaries, including the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) who rejected the idea originally, and my right hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) and for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), all rejected this idea, because the police advisers said that it was not a good idea. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to listen to those in the House who, for the past 15 years, have said that it is a very good idea, and could we have some consultation?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend has a track record of making arguments for a long time and finally getting there. I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State writes to him specifically about the Port of Tilbury police.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): We heard earlier in the House that almost 1 billion adult learning places have been lost over the last five years. That is causing concern in my Lincolnshire constituency, but it is part of a deeper fear about the access to opportunities and the provision of services in rural areas, fuelled by concern about post office closures, inadequate police funding, fire brigades and the centralisation of health services. May we have a debate about the quality of life in rural Britain, because there is a widespread fear in Lincolnshire, and I suspect elsewhere, that this Government have a careless disregard for the countryside?

Ms Harman: I deny that this Government have a disregard for the quality of life in rural Britain and I would remind the hon. Gentleman that we have seen big increases in investment in education for under-fives and school-age children and in further and higher education, and will continue to do so.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 2009?

That this House fully supports the IraqChild appeal launched by the UK-based Iraqi Association to raise £250,000 for emergency protection for children through the Andalus Medical Clinic in Baghdad; notes that children in Baghdad will suffer disproportionately this summer through sweltering heat, electricity shortages and lack of air conditioning in addition to the violence and sectarian strife which has led to the displacement of thousands of children and many orphans having to fend for themselves; further notes that terrorists are using children as decoys for sadistic killings, that one in eight Iraqi children died of disease or violence before reaching their fifth birthday in 2005, and that there are worryingly high levels of malnourishment; believes that this non-sectarian project, which was developed through a lengthy consultation process with concerned medical personnel in Baghdad and local non-governmental organizations, is credible; points out that, for example, £22 can buy a child's clothing pack, £48 can treat a child for diarrhoea and ear infection, £60 can pay for a qualified nurse to care for 10 children every week, £650 can pay for a medical doctor for a month to visit 10 families with children every week, and £1,580 can maintain running a children's clinic for a month for eight children everyday; and urges widespread moral and material assistance for this vital humanitarian initiative.

It refers to the appeal for the children of Baghdad, wherein the Iraqi Association in this country is launching an appeal for £250,000 to raise money to develop a clinic in Baghdad to help with the one in eight children who will die this summer. I would ask that this be debated at the next sitting of the House, but there will not be a sitting over the summer and thousands of children will die. Can the Minister ensure that this motion gets to the relevant Departments, to see whether they can help to pay?

Ms Harman: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the appeal to my attention. I know that he has worked alongside the trade union movement in Iraq and he raises another very good cause, which I will bring to the attention of my ministerial colleagues.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I was very pleased to receive a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), telling me:

"The future use of Llandrindod Wells courthouse has been reviewed and it will remain open for the next few years."

No reasons were given for the change of decision—no indication of what "the next few years" may be. But earlier in the letter, it said:

"Her Majesty's Courts Service is committed to putting the public first in the delivery of justice".

I think this must be a radical change of policy, so will the Leader of the House make an opportunity to have a debate on the future of the magistrates courts, particularly in rural areas, so that witnesses, victims and professionals can have ready access to justice?

Ms Harman: Perhaps that is an issue that the hon. Gentleman could return to in the Adjournment debate this afternoon. The important thing is to have court systems that are accessible to people locally and to have disabled access and good provision for victims and witnesses.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): Following on from the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham), will my right hon. and learned Friend arrange for a statement to the House about the increased fatalities in the construction industry? She will be aware from yesterday's statement by the

[Jim Sheridan]

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that there have been significant increases in the deaths of those deemed to be self-employed and indeed vulnerable. Migrant workers are being compelled by illegal gangmasters on to a false classification of self-employment and as a consequence, the safety imperative that is delivered through PAYE is lost. Rather than reinventing the wheel, can she use her good offices to influence the Government to extend the Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004 into the construction industry?

Ms Harman: I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform will be considering this question. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for introducing, by way of a private Member's Bill, what became the Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004 and I remind the House that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is, as we all are, concerned about too many deaths in the construction industry and has set up a forum to work with the construction industry to improve health and safety.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): May I renew the request that I made to the Leader of the House last week for an early debate on Iran and Afghanistan? Many of us believe that our policies in Iraq are deeply flawed and many of us believe that, with the available forces, we will not be able to achieve in Afghanistan any of the objectives that we have set ourselves. We must debate those matters urgently and frequently.

Ms Harman: We have regular debates on Afghanistan and Iraq for Members to participate in. In the meantime, I take the opportunity to express my strong support for the work that our armed forces do in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware of any plans that the Department for Transport has to change the Aviation Minister's title to the Minister for BAA? Despite the right hon. and learned Lady's help, BAA still continues to have the environmental data relating to the expansion of Heathrow whereas they have not been made available to me. Following her assistance, I received a response from the Minister, but he told me that he does not think that it is in the public's interest to release this data. How can it possibly be in the public's interest not to release the data to the public while, at the same time, sharing that data with the operator of Heathrow, BAA? Can she investigate this issue further during the recess and, if necessary, have a debate on it when we return in October?

Ms Harman: Clear, well established rules have been agreed by the House on the basis of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 that was introduced by this Government and they make available information that was previously kept secret. I suggest that the hon. Lady refer to those rules. Then she will understand why in this case there is obviously an exception to that Act.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Equality of access to the NHS requires access. Today the Horton hospital is having to admit patients from Oxford because the John Radcliffe cannot cope. That is not because of the flooding; it is a regular fortnightly occurrence. By a cruel twist of irony, today is the day when the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS trust is considering proposals that will severely undermine the viability of the Horton as a general hospital. So can the Leader of the House join me in thanking Mr. Speaker for providing a debate in Westminster Hall on 10 October on the future of smaller general hospitals? If the Government continue to undermine general hospitals, they will be undermining a fundamental principle of the NHS.

Ms Harman: The fundamental principle of the NHS is that it should treat patients according to need. The greatly increased investment in the NHS has happened in the hon. Gentleman's constituency as well as throughout the country, but I shall draw his comments to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I reiterate the plea that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made for a proper debate in the autumn not just on flooding but on the protection of our critical national infrastructure? The Leader of the House will know how near we came earlier this week to losing power in the whole county of Gloucestershire; that was avoided only through the marvellous work of our emergency services and armed forces. However, that and the loss of water supplies in huge parts of Gloucestershire, including some areas of my constituency, highlighted a critical problem that it would be sensible to debate when we return in the autumn.

Ms Harman: These issues will be covered in detail in the review that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has announced. I take this opportunity, as the hon. Gentleman did, to pay tribute to the work undertaken by local authorities employees, Environment Agency employees, the police and the armed services who are all working together to protect people during these very difficult floods.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): May we please have a debate in Government on time on the Floor of the House on the continuing crisis in Burma? Given that the illegal military dictatorship there is guilty of extra-judicial killings, rape as a weapon of war, compulsory relocation, forced labour, the use of child soldiers, the use of human minesweepers and the bestial destruction of villages throughout eastern Burma on virtually a daily basis and given that this week the report of the Select Committee on International Development calls for significant changes in Government policy towards the internally displaced people and refugees in the area, does the right hon. and learned Lady not agree that it is about time that we had the first ever debate here in this Chamber on how, through concerted action, we can force the Government of Burma to stop slaughtering their people and to start liberating them?

Ms Harman: The whole House will identify with the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman has expressed about the Government of Burma. As I have announced, there will be on a debate on Thursday 11 October on the report on human rights from the Foreign Affairs Committee. I hope that will give him and other hon. Members the opportunity to raise the issue of the appalling breaches of human rights in Burma.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Yesterday in Kettering, a man with a knife threatened staff in three separate shops in the town centre. When the House returns in October, may we have an urgent debate in Government time on the Floor of the House about what on earth this country is going to do about the growing problem of knife crime?

Ms Harman: Last week, we had a statement from the Home Secretary about her plans for crime reduction. I am sure that the local authority, the police and community organisations in the hon. Gentleman's area will work with my right hon. Friend and her Department to make that a reality in his constituency.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on special educational needs funding? Many schools in my constituency find that they are getting less funding for children with special educational needs than other schools in less affluent and more deprived areas are getting for children with exactly the same educational needs. Surely funding for special educational needs should be given on the basis of need and not on the affluence of the surrounding area. May we have a debate on this important issue for parents, children and teachers in many of my local schools?

Ms Harman: The allocation of funding between different schools is obviously a matter for the local education authority to address and no doubt the hon. Gentleman speaks to it about it. However, when he talks about the importance of the right level of funding for special educational needs, I wholly identify with the comments. In fact, one of the reasons that I joined the Labour party was that I thought it would be better to have really good investment in public services for the people in greatest need rather than tax cuts for the wealthy.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Following on from what the right hon. and learned Lady has just said, could she therefore explain why my constituent, Mrs. Kruger, who is going blind will not receive NHS treatment but if she moved to Scotland, she would receive NHS treatment and her sight would be saved? Square that.

Ms Harman: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman on previous occasions, he should raise the case of individual constituents with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. I will bring the issue to his attention, but the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence considers what should be available and at what stage for different disorders.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007

Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007

Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007

Offender Management Act 2007

Pensions Act 2007

National Trust (Northern Ireland) Act 2007

Aim Higher (10-year Strategy)

12.29 pm

The Minister for Children, Young People and Families (Beverley Hughes): With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement.

Two weeks ago my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out how the new Department for Children, Schools and Families would accelerate the drive to raise standards of attainment, particularly for the most disadvantaged children. Today's statement responds to the distinctive needs of young people and looks at how we can better support them through the development of positive activities and places to go.

The joint review by my Department and the Treasury of national and international research, including on the views of young people themselves, has established a number of key findings about adolescence on which we must now act. First, today's teenagers do indeed face a much more complex process of growing up, with an unprecedented range of opportunities, but with new risks and challenges, too. Secondly, social and economic trends, including globalisation, mean that academic and vocational skills alone are no longer sufficient to equip young people for our changing labour market.

Thirdly, young people also need well developed capabilities—sometimes called social and emotional or non-cognitive skills—in order to acquire the flexibility, adaptability and resilience to overcome challenge and change. Employers are increasingly demanding those capabilities too. Finally, although committed parents and good schools are always crucial, these additional capabilities are not largely acquired through formal learning; they are acquired by participating in positive, structured activities with trusted adults. It is now clear that taking part in organised activities—whether sport, music, drama or volunteering, or the Scouts, the Guides or a rap group—led by responsible adults is how young people develop confidence, tenacity and tolerance, and how they learn to lead, co-operate with others and solve problems.

Those attributes are not just nice for young people to have; they are essential if young people are to overcome the challenges of adolescence and mature into well adjusted adults. The strategy is focused on ensuring that all our youngsters can enjoy their teenage years—a formative time in their lives—while at the same time, and crucially, developing the capabilities essential for success. The strategy builds on the unprecedented investment and progressive reform that the Government have already undertaken in relation to young people through Every Child Matters and Connexions—with extra support targeted at those most in need. It complements our decision to raise the age of participation in education and training and extends the initiatives set out in the Green Paper "Youth Matters".

As a result of these measures, and the hard work of parents and the many dedicated practitioners working with young people, and contrary to the hype about youth being in crisis, the facts show that most young people are doing better than ever before. Exam results and the numbers staying on in education are both at all-time highs, with more than 59 per cent. gaining five good GCSEs and 77 per cent. of 16 and 17-year-olds continuing in learning and training. More young people are volunteering than any other age group. Compared with previous generations, young people are more accepting of other faiths and races, more liberal about gender roles and more likely to express satisfaction with their lives.

We also know, however, that a minority of young people are not sharing in that success. They are young people who are born into disadvantage, involved in high-risk behaviour, underachieving at school and, crucially, failing to develop the capabilities that they need for the future. They are held back by low self-esteem, lack of self-discipline and poor self-control. All those factors are strongly linked to serious problems such as crime, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of education and training, and the misuse of drink and drugs. Disadvantaged young people are much less likely to get the chance to take part in organised activities—organised through school or by their parents—and so they are doubly disadvantaged. The result is that the young people who most need those capabilities to meet the significant challenges that they face are the least likely to acquire them.

The backdrop to all that is an unrelentingly negative view of young people in this country, with the problems of the few eclipsing the achievements of the many. Some 71 per cent. of media stories about young people are negative. It is no wonder that 98 per cent. of young people have told us that they feel stereotyped, criticised and undervalued, with their achievements unfairly disregarded. Under the strategy, we are determined both to rebalance the public debate about young people and to transform their opportunities to take part in positive activities and to have places to go—especially for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or disabled.

Three principles underpin this vision: empowerment, access and quality. Our youth opportunity and capital funds are already putting real spending power in young people's hands. Some 650,000 teenagers have already taken part and benefited. It is already clear that when young people influence local decision making, opportunities and services improve, so we will invest a further £173 million over the next three years through the funds. To ensure that we are reaching the most disadvantaged and excluded young people, we are going to invest an additional £25 million in the most deprived neighbourhoods. But we want to go further. Our expectation is that by 2018 young people will have direct influence over at least 25 per cent. of local authority budgets for positive activities.

We also want a step change in what is on offer locally to all young people—again, especially the most disadvantaged. The strategy includes major new investment in places to go. Unclaimed bank assets will complement new Government spending to support our aspiration of an exciting, modern, up-to-date place for young people in every community. Local authorities will lead public, private and voluntary sector partnerships, working with young people to develop visionary facilities for teenagers while addressing problems such as poor transport that would otherwise mean that some young people missed out. We want to develop young people's capacity for leadership and entrepreneurship through a new fund, creating, in

effect, a national institute of youth leadership. We will also support older teenagers to set up social enterprises in their communities and we will promote intergenerational activity by encouraging adults—especially active retired people—to volunteer and mentor young people.

Our success in engaging the most excluded young people will be the critical test of the strategy, because they have most to gain yet are the least likely to participate. We will invest in a variety of ways of reaching them. In our most deprived communities, we will test cutting-edge approaches to creating more and better youth facilities—informing how we spend the unclaimed assets in the future. We will also invest up to £82 million, in addition to the existing funding of £140 million, in established schemes such as the Positive Activities for Young People and Youth Inclusion programmes, to increase them and make them available all year round.

We will also invest up to £100 million so that third-sector providers with a proven track record in working with vulnerable young people can expand and sustain their activities into the future. We will build on the successful Do it 4 Real residential scheme, which has already demonstrated that bringing together young people from different backgrounds raises aspirations, especially among the more disadvantaged, and fosters community cohesion. A further £15 million will subsidise those who otherwise could not afford to take part.

Finally, this new investment must be matched by further reform. Despite significant progress since "Youth Matters", services for young people are too often fragmented, patchy and poor. Yet research shows that only high-quality services make the difference. We need stronger leadership, and more skilled and creative people working with our teenagers—good role models who can relate to and inspire young people from all backgrounds. The strategy sets out a 10-year work force reform programme, supported by new investment of £25 million. That includes a leadership programme to attract more graduates into the sector, building on the successful model of the Teach First scheme. We will also expect local authorities, youth offending teams and primary care trusts to start to pool their budgets—a radical change to drive a renewed focus on prevention and early intervention.

With the strategy, we are making the most ambitious commitment to all our young people for decades, supported over the period 2008 to 2011 by £124 million of new investment, reinvestment of unclaimed assets and £60 million of new Government capital for youth facilities, and £495 million of continued baseline funding. I hope that Members of Parliament on both sides of the House will join together and take the lead in promoting a better appreciation of our nation's young people—our future—and that, through the strategy, we can achieve a transformation of the opportunities young people need to succeed. I commend the statement to the House.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I first welcome the Minister for Children, Young People and Families to her newly re-badged but long-standing role, and thank her for giving me prior sight of the statement? There is much merit to it, and much of it sounds very good. Over many years, she has presided over a plethora of projects aimed at children and young people, but the projects will be judged on effectiveness, quality, and the quality of the outcomes for the young people concerned, not on quantity and the amount of boxes that have been ticked.

I could say that part of the announcement is perhaps a statement of the bleedin' obvious: the right hon. Lady said that whether we are talking about sport, music, drama, or volunteering, or being in the Scouts, the Guides or a rap group, it was clear that taking part in organised activities led by responsible adults is how young people develop confidence, tenacity and tolerance—words that could have been spoken by Baden-Powell 100 years ago on the occasion of the foundation of the Scouts, if it were not for the mention of rap groups. It is not rocket science, but we welcome any initiative that at last acknowledges the enormous challenge that we face from an increasingly disillusioned and disengaged younger generation who are experiencing huge and increasing gaps in opportunity and achievement.

As the right hon. Lady said, young people are quick to be fingered by a hostile media as the source of all society's ills. Some 71 per cent. of stories about them are negative, and do not praise the achievements of the vast majority of decent children and young people who face growing challenges, and who grow up in an increasingly uncertain and insecure world. The image is not helped by constant Government announcements about youth crime and antisocial behaviour. The Government treat the fact that a growing number of young people are subject to antisocial behaviour orders, and a record number of children are locked up in our prisons, as a benchmark of success rather than an admission of failure and as symptoms of our increasingly broken society. We have to tackle the underlying causes of those problems.

The Institute for Public Policy Research report, out today, confirmed everything that we said in the social justice report a couple of weeks ago: youths in Britain are more likely to drink, take drugs, have sex, join gangs and get into fights than youths almost anywhere else in Europe. It confirms, too, the findings of February's UNICEF report about—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. The House listened with courtesy to the Minister, and it ought to do the same for the hon. Gentleman.

Tim Loughton: I do not know whether hon. Members want to challenge the findings of the IPPR report, but it confirmed the findings of the social justice report and the UNICEF report that was produced earlier this year. It is no good trying to deny the reality; we have to face up to it, and then tackle it. The Labour party seems to be in denial. We have a problem with obesity. One in 10 of our young people has a mental health problem, and the number is growing. There are 454,000 prescriptions for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder drugs, and 212,000 prescriptions relating to depression among children who are sometimes as young as six. There has been a 300 per cent. rise in Chlamydia over the past 12 years, and 8,500 children were admitted to accident and emergency departments last year for binge-drinking and alcohol-related problems. Children are drinking younger, drinking stronger and drinking more often.

[Tim Loughton]

All those problems were recognised in the social justice report, under the excellent authorship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith).

We should not shrink from the stark reality of the challenge that we face. We must form proposals on the tough decisions that we will have to make, and we must confirm that we face an increasingly broken society. The opportunity and achievement gap has widened under this Government, and some of the appalling outcomes for young people are the symptoms of that broken society. The truth is that the 10-year strategy should have started 10 years ago. The Prime Minister himself has warned often enough about the seriousness of the situation. In the pre-Budget report of 2005, he said:

"we have to do far more where in the past too little has been done, investing in youth and community facilities that are modern, relevant and welcoming for teenagers up and down the country."—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2005; Vol. 440, c. 613.]

In a speech to the Fabian Society in January last year, he said:

"in 2006 a new British youth national community service can galvanise and challenge the energies and enthusiasm of a fresh generation of teenagers and young people."

The Prime Minister recognised the problem a rather long time ago. Today is an announcement of some Government money and a raid on orphan assets—we are not talking about public funds—that might otherwise have been used to address the pensions crisis.

We need to know about the devil in the detail. We would like to ask some questions about the warm words in the statement; there were a lot of buzz words relating to cutting-edge approaches that the right hon. Lady might like to define. In particular, we would like to know where exactly the money is coming from, and about the sustainability of the funding. She talked about a plan to make one-off hits on orphan assets between 2008 and 2011. Providing the services is not just about building lots of shiny new buildings so as to present photo opportunities for ribbon cutting by Ministers. There are underused halls, schools, church halls and youth centres that could be used far more before we build more. Secure revenue is essential if we are to set up new programmes that put properly trained staff and volunteers in place, and if we are to provide continuity, so can she tell us when the 10-year funding plan will be put in place? We must not return to the three-year cycle in which a new scheme is announced only for a new fashion to come along, the funding to disappear and it is back to the drawing board. Sustainability will be key to the success of the projects.

If the programme is not just about buildings, it certainly is about staff. How will the programme fully engage with the 500,000 volunteers in youth work, including the many young volunteers whom the right hon. Lady mentioned? How will it support the many excellent youth organisations in the voluntary sector that already do great work with much expertise, knowledge and dedication? She mentioned some projects in her statement. What about projects such as the Bolton lads and girls club, which I visited with my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) and others? It has been going since 1889, operates seven nights and days a week, 52 weeks a year, has 3,200 active members, and exists on very little public money. What about the Young Adult Trust, which raises aspirations by bringing together groups of people from different backgrounds? Will she assure us that she will not try to reinvent the wheel, but will work with the expertise found in examples of good practice?

Where will the extra trained staff who are needed to run the facilities come from? In my constituency, there is a waiting list to join the Scouts, which is a tremendous achievement, but one reason why we have a waiting list is the lack of volunteers who are prepared to come forward and give their time. Will she look at streamlining the Criminal Records Bureau checking and vetting systems, so that volunteers are not subject to multiple checks and are not deterred from offering their services in those important areas? Exactly what steps is she taking to invest in youth work of an appropriate quality, and how will that work be linked to the extended schools and the enhanced programme that was announced yesterday? It is not clear how she intends to work with local authorities and local youth services to manage the new investment and make sure that the activities are suitably diverse. They have to appeal to young people, so that we can engage with them constructively. Most of all, local authorities and local youth services have to make sure that they do not replicate existing services, and make sure that they are fun.

The right hon. Lady mentioned working with young people to fashion services, and we welcome that. We also welcome what she said about giving young people control over their budgets. How exactly does she plan to ensure genuine engagement with young people in planning the services? It is a common fallacy that all that young people want is a new skateboard ramp and a pat on the head from a council official, and they will be in a state of nirvana. How will she engage with youth mayors—a post that we have in my constituency—the Youth Parliament and the Youth Cabinet to make sure that the proposals have the full backing and engagement of local people?

Will the services be aimed at the people who are most in need, and who are often the most difficult to access, or will the money be spent too thinly among 11 million children? The right hon. Lady mentioned working with other agencies, which we welcome, especially health agencies, on problems such as obesity, sexually transmitted diseases and substance abuse, yet her Government raided £300 million from the sexual health strategy fund to plug deficits in other parts of the health service. How exactly does she think that the money provided in the next three years will plug the enormous gap in the sexual health strategy fund, let alone the enormous gap in funding to tackle alcohol abuse, as the money will have to apply to all sorts of other things, such as setting up social enterprises and work force reform? How will she provide the counselling services that she mentioned to tackle the underlying problems of unhappiness and mental illness? We need to make sure that the programme is a sustainable, meaningful long-term project and not another poorly planned gimmick like the Connexions card—the loyalty card scheme for 16 to 19-year-olds run by Capita, which was a costly £100 million failure, with just a 3 per cent. target take-up, and which has now been abandoned?

What will be the measures of the success or failure of these plans? That should not be based only on raw figures such as those that I have mentioned. The scheme's success should be measured by whether it results in children engaging more with their parents. The state is a poor parent, as the children in care figures alarmingly show. We cannot deal with children in isolation. It is essential that the Government do not try to displace parents, but work with them and their children, and acknowledge that in the vast majority of cases it is parents who know best how to bring up their own children.

If the Government take that on board, put their money where their mouth has been uttering warm words for too long, and work with the expertise and tremendous enthusiasm of the voluntary sector, they will have our support for the scheme.

Beverley Hughes: I am disappointed that, despite a promising start for about 10 seconds, yet again the hon. Gentleman could not resist the temptation of repeating the latest *Daily Mail* mantra and in so doing writing off all our young people, as the newspaper does today, as the worst in Europe. He had the opportunity to give the serious response that the issue deserves. He could have accepted the invitation at the end of my statement to be positive about young people, to commit the Conservatives—*[Interruption.]* He started promisingly, as I said, for about 10 seconds before he lapsed easily into his default position.

The hon. Gentleman could have committed his party to challenging the negative stereotypes which young people, in the most extensive ever consultation of them, told us that they detest—but no; he thinks that it will be to the Tories' political advantage to trash teenagers. That is what he did today—*[Interruption.]* Not only is the picture that he painted untrue of the vast majority of young people, but I do not understand how he thinks it will help his party for him constantly to run down Britain and young people—the broken society that he spoke about—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. These are serious matters and it does not help sensible discussion if all the time we have silly remarks from both sides of the House.

Beverley Hughes: I wonder what the hon. Gentleman thinks such talk says to all the young people who are working hard and, on many indices, doing better than any previous generation. What does he think parents in Britain make of Conservatives apparently thinking that they are doing such a terrible job of bringing up their children? Yes, a minority of young people are having problems, and we are very concerned about those, as we have been for the past 10 years. However, those such as UNICEF and the *Daily Mail* this morning which say that there has never been a worse time to be a young person in this country are dumbing down the real progress that most children, with dedicated help from their parents, families and teachers, are making.

I do not accept the conclusions of the UNICEF report or the *Daily Mail's* interpretation of IPPR research. For us it is important that every young person reaches their potential, but with child poverty decreasing, when it trebled under the Tory Government; with teenage pregnancy falling, when it reached an all-time high—the highest in Europe—under his Government; and with drug use falling and educational standards rising, life for the majority of young people in Britain is getting much better.

The hon. Gentleman says that this is not rocket science, but I should let him know that we have been working on these issues for the past 10 years. He asked why we did not start 10 years ago. The answer is that we did. If he were answering questions today, I could ask him why that work did not start 28, 15 or 11 years ago. Most of the opportunities and facilities that we are discussing today, including the quality of the youth service and youth workers, all but disappeared under 18 years of Tory rule. That is the legacy that we were left with. Our response since 1997, under Every Child Matters, Connexions, the creation of youth offending teams, the intensive activity programmes that I referred to, the volunteer service, the millennium volunteers, has been progressively to rebuild the infrastructure and the services that allow us today to take the next step for the young people of this country.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a number of issues, all of which are dealt with in the strategy. When he gets a chance to read it, he will see the proposals for work force development and reform and the importance of the voluntary sector. He mentioned Bolton lads and girls club. That is used as a case study in the document, because we want to build on what the third sector is providing. He mentioned extended schools. The £1 billion that we announced yesterday will assist.

When young people and their parents have the chance to look at the opportunity that the hon. Gentleman has blown by telling us where the Tory party stands, they will ask, like the voters in Ealing, Southall and Sedgefield, what the Conservative party is now for. Young people will know a sham when they see one. The hon. Gentleman said nothing positive at all to them today. It is more of the same and that is nothing.

This Government are serious about addressing poverty and inequality and meeting the distinctive needs of young people. That is what the strategy is about. I had hoped that the hon. Gentleman would support the spirit of it and forge a better appreciation of our young people. He has shown again that the Tories are not up to it.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend realise that not only do I welcome the statement, but that people in my constituency do not think that society or their community is broken? They resent such terms. Indeed, some of them remember a former Prime Minister who said that there was no such thing as society.

I welcome the statement. I particularly like the emphasis on empowerment. We have learned from all the research and work that has been done over the years that we should listen to young people and then give them leadership. My recently failed private Member's Bill sought the guarantee of two weeks' community leadership training for 16 to 18-year-olds. What is important is not only empowering young people, but the quality of the investment. There is an amazing group of volunteers out there in every community in the country. All they want is a bit more resource and a bit more access. It does not have to be a

[Mr. Barry Sheerman]

shiny new buildings. There are too many buildings in our towns and cities that are not open after 5 pm. What we need is opportunity.

I have one piece of advice for my right hon. Friend. There is more money if she needs it—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is about to come to a question.

Mr. Sheerman: Certainly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Could we perhaps have it now?

Mr. Sheerman: Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is £62 million languishing in landfill tax, which was supposed to have been used for educational research, that she could get her hands on? It could help the effort that she has announced.

Beverley Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Like him, I regret the tone of the comments from the Conservative Front Bench. Interestingly, I wonder what divisions there are between the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) who I understand has distanced himself from the UNICEF report and said that it was unfair. We will see where that disagreement ends up.

My hon. Friend is right to say that empowerment and the involvement of young people is not only important as a principle. As we know, the youth opportunity and youth capital funds that we have been giving to local authorities over the past year to spend on the condition that they spend it with young people are making a demonstrable difference to the quality, relevance and attractiveness of what is on offer to young people. Indeed, my right hon. Friends and I and the Prime Minister had a meeting with young people today in the Cabinet Room. Their single message to us was, "Please tell the people to talk to us, to listen to what we have to say, and to involve us in decision making." One young man said, "If you give us money to spend, we are not going to buy a PlayStation for everybody in their bedrooms. We are going to spend it on positive things that bring us together and help us to progress." I thought that that was profound.

I will investigate the point about landfill tax, because any additional resources that I can get my hands on will be welcome.

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

I welcome the tone of the statement and some of the intentions that lie behind it. As has been said, it has appeared on the same day as the Institute for Public Policy Research report. The *Daily Mail* coverage is a caricature of the actual report—a Hogarth image of debauched behaviour by young people, which I do not accept and recognise as an accurate picture of young people in society today. I know that many young people participate in volunteering, raise money for charity and achieve in schools.

I hope that the statement is the welcome start of a departure from some of the language of the Tony Blair era, namely the language of marching children to cash points, the language of dealing with feral youth and the language of imposing dispersal orders on young people, such as the fatuous dispersal order imposed on skateboarders in my constituency this week. I hope that it is a fresh approach that will empower young people.

On money, the Minister's Department, unlike all other Whitehall Departments, has its comprehensive spending review settlement for 2008 to 2011. Will the Minister say how much of the various sums identified in the statement is genuinely new money, rather than recycled existing money? Specifically, how much of it is Government money as opposed to the money of local authorities, youth offending teams and primary care trusts? How much is expected to be raised on the rather flimsy financial basis of recovering unclaimed assets lying in bank accounts? If investment in youth is really important—I think that it is—is that the correct source of money for that important investment?

The statement mentions that one of the aims is "empowerment", which I welcome. However, the only example that I could find in my brief perusal of the statement was for young people to have "influence" over 25 per cent. of local authority budgets by 2018, which is not exactly immediate empowerment. I expected the statement to say much more about how we can engage young people in citizenship and how we can ensure that every school and local authority encourages young people to participate in elections to the Youth Parliament. The Select Committee Chairman has left, but the recent Select Committee report, to which I was a signatory, recommends that every school should have a school council. If that were implemented, it would teach young people through practical action the skills of working together. I also hope that at some point we will have another debate about reducing the voting age to 16.

Will the Minister work with the Minister for Schools and Learners in making sure that every school in the country teaches all aspects of the personal, social and health education curriculum and the social and emotional aspects of the learning curriculum without opt-out? Many of the problems that have been caricatured in the *Daily Mail* and that have been the subject of the crossfire between Government and Conservative Front Benchers could be dealt with positively in schools, if that curriculum were taught without exception.

Investment in youth workers is important. Many hon. Members know that before I became a Member of Parliament my professional career for 17 years was as a tax consultant, but the first job that I was trained to do was as a children's play leader for the YMCA and for the local authority. *[Interruption.]* It was good training for this atmosphere. I know that by working with young people, one can teach them how to trust and about teamwork. Importantly, one can teach them about risk, too, through games, which is something that has been missing in the past 10 years. Not only are those qualities good for children, but they will stand them in good stead in later life.

The statement specifically mentions £25 million for the work force to attract graduates into youth work, which is worth while, but I wonder whether we can do

more to encourage community leaders and senior citizens into youth work. People who have lost their jobs in other industries could also be retrained. That point particularly applies to men, because many young, disaffected men need male role models—they may not get it at home, but they could get it through the youth service.

Can we have a statement about detached workers? Much of the language of the statement is about places to go and investment in youth centres, but it is people who will make the difference. Rather than imposing dispersal orders on skateboarders in Bristol, it would have been much better to have sent a detached youth worker to talk to the young people, to engage with them and to tackle what is perceived as their antisocial behaviour.

Finally, the statement mentions "social and emotional skills". I think that values are important, too. Youth work has a great role to play in teaching young people tolerance and respect for other people in our diverse society. In particular, I would welcome an initiative to make anti-bullying work part of the youth service. I welcome much of the content of the statement, but the approach will succeed only if we engage with young people, rather than demonising them, and if we involve them in the construction of policies, rather than imposing policies on them.

Beverley Hughes: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments and the tone of his contribution. If the Conservative spokesman had made a similar contribution, we would have had a much better debate and, more importantly, we would have sent a more powerful signal to young people from both sides of the House.

The tone of the statement was chosen for a particular reason. That does not mean that we can disavow the important work that we had to do to make sure that if some young people behave badly, there is the wherewithal at a local level to deal with it. Many young people suffer from such behaviour, and we need to protect them and demonstrate to them that they are part of our consideration.

The hon. Gentleman asked about money. The new money from the comprehensive spending review programme is £124 million, plus another £60 million in capital to support the unclaimed assets, when they come on stream. I have not attempted to claim that the baseline funding is new money from the CSR, but it was previously short-term funding, whereas now it has been consolidated, so in a sense it is almost new money. That is a substantial contribution to young people.

The hon. Gentleman asked me what "influence" means. On the basis of our experience with the youth opportunity fund and the youth capital fund, we are saying to local authorities that we expect them to spend those resources in conjunction with young people. Most local authorities have risen to the spirit of that challenge by setting up panels of young people to make decisions about whether bids are successful, and groups of young people, obviously with the support of adults, are submitting bids. The system is suffused with young people's participation, which is the model that we want to take forward. When the hon. Gentleman has the opportunity to read the full document, he will see that there is a lot of discussion about other forms of influence. The possibilities include young mayors—we spoke to the ex-young mayor of Lewisham today—young advisers, mystery shoppers and so on.

We have recently announced £13 million to extend social and emotional work to primary schools and secondary schools, which is important.

I do not underestimate the importance of the work force. The strategy is about not only new facilities, but the fundamental reform and remodelling of the work force. The work force will have the opportunity to develop the skills, particularly leadership skills, that they need to develop our young people's values and capabilities.

When the hon. Gentleman has read the document, I hope that he will have more questions for me, and I am happy to discuss with him how we can work together to take the matter forward.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Given the number of hon. Members seeking to catch my eye, it ought to be possible—it ought to have been possible—to call everyone today, but unless questions, and perhaps answers, are much briefer, a number of hon. Members will be disappointed.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Keighley Cougars rugby league club has for a number of years promoted out-of-school activities for young men and women in various areas, and I have the great honour to be a member of the trust that oversees the organisation of that work. One of the most encouraging events that I have been to was to see boys and girls, white and Asian, training together at Lawkholme lane with a rugby football a year or two ago. Does my right hon. Friend agree that public money should not be going into any youth facility that is discriminatory but into organisations that encourage cohesion and integration between the communities?

Beverley Hughes: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and commend the efforts that she has made to promote cohesion and integration. This issue has come more into our consciousness and understanding in recent years. I can assure her that, through the strategy, we will make every effort to ensure that there is integration in the youth facilities that we want to provide.

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): I welcome much of the Minister's statement. However, may I gently say to her that there is a big difference between being positive about children and holding this Government to account for their policy towards children, as did my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)? The strategy fails to address one of the most important causes of educational failure—family breakdown, to which almost every aspect of educational failure is related. What reassurance can she give the House that she recognises that fact, and what long-term measures are in the strategy to deal with it?

Beverley Hughes: Family breakdown can be a cause of compounding disadvantage for many young people.

[Beverley Hughes]

In trying to address that, we have worked to provide support, specifically for parents, through a whole range of mechanisms, including children's centres and extended schools, and through work with local authorities. However, if the hon. Gentleman thinks that the situation would be improved by transferable tax allowances for married people, which would benefit only one in 10 young people and not the most disadvantaged, the Conservatives have to think again about how they address family breakdown.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which was positive, intelligent and thoughtful. Figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development suggest that the dispersion between those who are successful educationally and those who fail is wider in Britain than in almost any other developed country, so there is still much to do. However, I applaud the Government for what has happened in the past 10 years. On the evidence of my constituency, much has been achieved and achievement is much higher than it was.

My right hon. Friend will know that the former Prime Minister's speechwriter recently left Downing street to teach in a London school, and he concluded that two serious problems in primary schools lead to this dispersion—teaching methods and failure to deal with behavioural problems in the classroom. Will she look again at what we can do to get the best teaching methods and to make better provision for those with behavioural problems?

Beverley Hughes: My hon. Friend will know that the Steer report accepted the importance of the issues that he mentions. Closing the gap between the most disadvantaged children and the rest, right across the board but particularly in terms of attainment, is an absolutely key priority. The investment of £1.3 billion that we are making into a much more personalised approach in the classroom to identify children who are at risk of falling behind is specifically designed to address that.

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): The Minister referred to the need to provide positive impressions of the contributions that young people make in our society. As she will be aware, the Respect taskforce, which has responsibility for all antisocial behaviour initiatives, has recently been transferred from the Home Office to her Department. That suggests that the Government view antisocial behaviour as a youth issue. What are they going to do to counteract that unfortunate impression?

Beverley Hughes: We are still working through how the transfer of the personnel working in that unit will be achieved. I think I am correct in saying that the most recent statistic is that only 41 per cent. of antisocial behaviour orders were issued to young people under the age of 18, so the hon. Gentleman is right to say that antisocial behaviour is not, by any means, exclusively a young person's problem. However, the taskforce is dealing with family intervention issues which have been very important in trying to identify and address the multiple problems of chaotic families, and it is that work in particular that we want to bring into the Department.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the £25 million for deprived areas. However, can I caution her against being too structured in terms of how that money is spent? Some of the things in which we have invested in the past, such as Connexions, have not been attractive to young people because the approach has been too structured. Will she encourage local authorities to carry out audits of parks and open spaces to see where they can introduce facilities for young people where they might be able to participate in less structured sporting activities? There is a great deal of goodwill among parents and other people who want to do things for young people, so will she ensure that the adult population are engaged in these facilities as well as young people themselves? Can she ensure that we cover core funding for voluntary organisations that are involved in youth work, because they often find that difficult? Will she undertake to meet me so that I can discuss all the other ideas that I have?

Beverley Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a tremendous champion of young people and the facilities that they need. I want local authorities to undertake an audit of everything in their community, including parks and open spaces. Those that have done so have often found that there is considerably more than they thought or that young people know about. They now have a duty to improve their offer to young people and to inform them and their parents more accurately about what is available. Sustainability of good third sector organisations is critical to this strategy, and we are putting resources behind that. I will happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): As an ex-cub scout, venture scout and assistant scout leader, I welcome the recognition of the importance of scouting in its centenary year and hope that funding follows.

The Minister will be aware that I am concerned that children are inappropriately put into care and that research demonstrates that 70 per cent. of children return to their parents when they escape from the control of the state at the age of 16. I am particularly concerned about deaths of children in care, particularly one that occurred in the Trafford local authority area earlier this year. We must ask why arbitrary bureaucratic rules prevent children in care from making toast for each other but do not allow people to prevent them from acting as youth prostitutes. Will she look into the treatment of children in care, including the activities they are allowed to be involved in?

Beverley Hughes: As an ex-Akela, I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of scouting.

It is very important that children in care are firmly included in the opportunities that the strategy is making available to all young people. In our White Paper, we proposed dedicated sums of money for each child in care to be spent in conjunction with them to

give them access to extended activities through schools and in the community. The attributes that I talked about are particularly important for the most disadvantaged young people, many of whom end up in the care system.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I, too, welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend, particularly the announcement of the additional £173 million over the next three years for the youth opportunity fund. In my constituency, a panel of young people has been making the awards from the YOF, and that has been very successful. However, there remain difficulties in engaging young people who are not in organised groups and who are often the most disadvantaged and the most at risk, both from themselves and others. Will she ensure that local agencies have proposals in place on how they plan to engage those young people as a condition of receiving YOF funds in future, as we need to equip all young people to face the challenges of a very difficult world?

Beverley Hughes: I want to acknowledge what my hon. Friend does in her constituency to promote such issues; she talks to me about them regularly. Although the strategy is for all young people, I made it clear in my statement how important it is that those who are disadvantaged get access to such opportunities. That is why we put in an additional £25 million, alongside the money for the youth opportunity fund for deprived areas and money for third sector organisations, which are often much better at accessing young people because they are more trusted. The evaluation of the first year of the youth opportunity fund shows that there has been considerable success in accessing disadvantaged young people, but not enough for my liking. We need to go further, and that will be a key criterion against which I judge success.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady prevent any further closures of special schools for those with moderate learning difficulties? I am delighted that she agrees that the vast majority of young people are decent, caring, honest, hard-working kids with integrity whose reputation is spoilt by a few yobs. Will she do nothing to prevent parents from properly and caringly chastising and disciplining their children to stop them turning into yobs?

Beverley Hughes: The hon. Gentleman knows that the answer to his main question is that such decisions rest with local authorities, which is exactly right. I will say, though—I made a particular point of this in my statement—that it is crucial that the opportunities we are opening up are open to disabled young people and those with special educational needs. I was at a youth theatre on Sunday watching a performance that included several disabled children and children with learning difficulties. What they got from being involved in that activity was tremendous, and we want to see an increase in such activity.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): While I enormously welcome the strategy, and the extra funds for youth clubs and positive activities, my right hon. Friend, and Akela, will be aware that some young people cannot be reached through clubs or organised activities, either because they are non-joiners or because the children at the clubs they go to—not the club staff themselves—are territorial and make it difficult for them. The only organisation in my area that has contact with these non-joiners is the safer neighbourhood teams. Would it be possible to spend some part of that £25 million for deprived areas on creating attached workers with safer neighbourhood teams, who could do things such as set out rules for the use of play areas, and negotiate with neighbouring parents? Those are often the biggest difficulties for children who want to take part in activities.

Beverley Hughes: It may be that safer neighbourhood teams have a role to play. We certainly need to recognise the importance of detached youth workers. There are, however, some really good voluntary organisations making great progress with some of the most alienated young people I have met. I mentioned Fairbridge, and I have visited a number of its projects. It is engaging with young people who have dropped out and are afraid to go on the streets in their communities, and it works with them through a whole series of graduated activities to get them back into the mainstream. I would not want to exclude important voluntary organisations that do some great work.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome warmly the thrust of the right hon. Lady's statement, but providing for the majority of young people in an area must not be allowed to dilute the responsibility to do more for those individuals, as distinct from areas, whose need is most acute. I politely put it to the Minister that the desperate struggles for funding of both the Nuffield speech and language unit and the Michael Palin centre for stammering children demonstrate conclusively the urgent need to review and bolster the commissioning arrangements and to make available central pots of funding so that parents do not have to wage an absolutely horrific and Kafkaesque battle at local level simply to get what their children need and deserve.

Beverley Hughes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment, and I genuinely value the way in which he constantly brings this issue to the attention of the House because it is very important. We have a rather terrible phrase, but it describes exactly what he is talking about: "progressive universalism". Within the context of universal services, we must take an important additional step and ensure that people have the methods and commitment to identify, reach and provide for minorities of young people, whatever their disadvantage, to make sure that they avail themselves of mainstream opportunities just as much as the majority.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I really welcome the emphasis in the statement on young people having a say. I know from consultations I have run in Slough, and in this House, how much sense and imagination they have to offer. In those consultations, however, young people whose families are most chaotic, and failing to support them because of drugs, alcohol or health issues, tend to get missed out. I am anxious that the positive programme she has advanced might not connect to that group of young people. Will she consider whether we could establish some sort of social work or emotional information network in primary

[Fiona Mactaggart]

schools to refer young people to activities out of school while they are still there for most of the day, before they drift into being out of school more often than they should be?

Beverley Hughes: I welcome the support from most hon. Members for the importance of recognising that this strategy must identify and reach the most disadvantaged young people, because that is my starting point, too.

On my hon. Friend's point, the work going on to extend the range of activities around the school day, with various enrichment activities, is an important part of the extended school programme, as is the use of the school as a hub for the referral of young people to more specialist services and the identification of young people who might otherwise miss out. As she knows, we announced yesterday a further £1.1 billion to enable all schools to offer those extended services, including the link to specialist services. That will greatly help what is available in the locality with regard to positive activities and support for children and young people.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly when I contrast it to my professional experience working in child care 15 or 20 years ago, when staff were being made redundant, budgets were being cut and there were certainly no new buildings. Could I ask the Minister whether she has made any provision for rural and semi-rural communities in her plans? Deprivation is clearly a difficult issue wherever it is, but it is particularly challenging when it is compounded by isolation.

Beverley Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for his question because I know that he has great expertise in these issues. We do not want local authorities to make all the provision themselves; we want them to work with the voluntary and private sectors. I have seen some great schemes in which there has been substantial involvement from the private sector. However, it is important that local authorities take the strategic lead because it is through that route that the characteristics of local problems, whether in urban or rural areas, can be identified through the participation of young people, and solutions can be found. Obviously, transport is a particular issue for youngsters in many rural areas, and it is important that local authorities talk to passenger transport authorities and to young people in order to find solutions to access problems.

Point of Order

1.29 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you tell me whether either you or Mr. Speaker have had any indication from Ministers about a policy for distributing White Papers to Members? I refer to the White Paper entitled "Delivering a Sustainable Railway", a personal copy of which I received from the House of Commons Members' post office, doubtless along with 645 other hon. Members. A perfectly serviceable summary accompanied it and it was possible to get a copy of the full report from the internet. For hon. Members, there was the possibility of a small amount of exercise by walking from one side of the Members' Lobby to the other to pick up a hard copy of the full White Paper, if they needed it, from the Vote Office.

Given that I suspect that approximately 500 to 600 of the individually delivered copies found their way straight into the recycling bins, is it not wasteful at a retail rate of £25 a copy for Ministers to insist on sending personal copies of the publication to hon. Members when it is unnecessary to do that?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): The way in which Departments produce and distribute White Papers is a matter for them, not the Chair. The hon. Gentleman's point is firmly on record and will doubtless be noted by those who are responsible for such matters.

Summer Adjournment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Siobhain McDonagh.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I advise the House that Mr. Speaker has placed a 12-minute limit on all speeches by Back Benchers today.

1.30 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I am delighted to participate in the summer Adjournment debate—I shall do so briefly in view of the many hon. Members who want to speak. I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary on the Front Bench and, indeed, the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara). The hon. Gentleman and I have an engagement to attend together at 6.30 this evening, so I am confident that the debate will finish on time.

I want to raise three issues. The first is the pathway project in my constituency. I am proud that we have a Labour Government who have allocated more money to the health service than any other Government in history. I am proud that the amount of money that we have spent trickles down to local communities. We have several impressive local improvement, finance trust schemes and new doctors' surgeries, and waiting times have been cut.

Imagine my disappointment and that of other hon. Members who represent Leicester and Leicestershire when the hierarchy of the health authority came to see us last week to announce that the pathway project—a £700 million project to rebuild and refurbish our three major hospitals in the city of Leicester—was to be shelved. The reason given was that Triskelion, the private sector partner, had decided to increase the price of the pathway from £711 million and to charge the health authority an additional £201 million. The chief executive of the health authority, Peter Reading, and the chairman of the strategic health authority decided that it was far too much to spend and that it would not represent value for money.

In the spirit of all-party consensus, the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) and I went to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), who was then Secretary of State for Health, a few months ago because of our concerns about the delays in the completion of the pathway project. It is a tragedy that the rebuilding and refurbishment, which would have transformed health services in Leicester and Leicestershire, will not now take place. It is a tragedy because, for seven years, local Members of Parliament and the public were presented with a vision of what underlay the pathway project. I am disappointed because we have no firm commitment from the health authority and those who advise it about future plans for redeveloping our hospitals.

I hope that Ministers will understand the concerns of not only the local Members of Parliament but the local communities about what appears to me to be a misuse of public funds. We want especially to know what has happened to the £23 million of taxpayers' money that went towards paying for the consultants and others who have produced no hospitals and no new health service.

I hope that when my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary replies, she will give me three assurances about the pathway project. First, we want to be assured that the £711 million that was originally allocated will remain in the health service in Leicester and that there is no question of it going elsewhere. Secondly, we want to be assured that the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) will meet Members of Parliament from the Leicestershire area in the next few weeks. I appreciate that it is traditional when we are in recess for Ministers to take their holiday—rightly; they deserve it—and for Members of Parliament to be busy with constituency and other parliamentary business. However, I am prepared to return to Westminster—and I know that that applies to my colleagues—to meet the Minister because, having been told about the decision, we feel that it is important to know what will happen in future. Thirdly, I hope that we will find out what has happened to the money that has already been spent on the local health service. Where has the £23 million gone? We can then justify to local people what has happened to their money.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and for mentioning the joint meeting that we held with the former Secretary of State for Health not long ago. Will he let me know when he manages to arrange the meeting with the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) because I should like to join him? Will he also remind the Parliamentary Secretary that my constituency has been affected by the collapse not only of the pathway project but of the Market Harborough hospitals project, and the consequent waste of money? The latter is on a much smaller scale but is none the less a waste of public money.

Keith Vaz: Absolutely. I will keep the hon. and learned Gentleman informed. He will recall his comments at the meeting when we were told that the hospital project might be downsized and that perhaps a floor would be taken away. He said, "We hope it's not the ground floor." It is important that the matter is tackled on an all-party basis because I believe that we have the best health service and we have let down those who have contributed to its success in Leicester and other parts of the county.

I have raised my second point, which is about video games, on many occasions in the House. Since we last had such a debate, I am delighted that the British Board of Film Classification has banned "Manhunt 2", the sequel to "Manhunt 1", which was produced a few years ago and caused so much controversy. According to Giselle Pakeerah, the mother of Stefan Pakeerah, the young Leicester boy who was stabbed to death in a park in Leicester when aged only 14, the 17-year-old killer copied exactly scenes from "Manhunt 1" to lure Stefan into the park and stab him 17 or 18 times with a knife.

"Manhunt 2" is even worse because it shows graphic scenes of violence, including people being syringed in the eyes and bludgeoned to death. I was delighted when the BBFC decided to ban it. However, having banned the first video game in 10 years, it is important that the Government react much more proactively. I know that

[Keith Vaz]

my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary is the mother of a young child. My children are 12 and 10 and I cannot supervise them every moment of the day. I see them at their computers—obviously, since I became interested in the subject, I check what they are doing there. However, peer groups of which young children are a part may result in their watching videos that are inappropriate for their age because they have access to those games.

A partnership between the retailers, the producers of the video games and the Government is therefore important to ensure, first, that labelling is clear. It is still about the size of a 10p piece, which is far too small. The content of some games is so serious that a warning should be splashed on the bottom that clearly states the age limit so that those games will not pass the retailers who sometimes sell them because inexperienced people operate cash registers and do not know that they should not sell them to someone who is under 18. Such labelling also means that, if such a game is lying around a house, people can see that it is inappropriate.

I welcome what the Government have done and the statement that Tony Blair made just before he resigned as Prime Minister. He said that there is a wider social responsibility, beyond the notion that the publishers should be able to make profits out of such games. A huge amount of money is made out of the production of such games, for which we have become the centre of Europe, but there is a wider social responsibility, too. I therefore hope very much that something can be done to ensure additional research. The Government can do that immediately, without having to wait for the publishers, although they ought to contribute towards the cost of the research.

My final point concerns one of my constituents, Mr. Abder Razak Filali-Tomouh, a British citizen who went abroad for a weekend trip to the continent. He came back with the legal limit of tobacco in his car, with his whole family. There was no question of his being above the limit provided for by the Treasury and mentioned by the Customs and Excise people. He was within the limit, but he was stopped on his arrival and asked why he had brought that amount of tobacco in. He explained that it was for his use and that of his family for the foreseeable future. Having committed no crime, he found that the contents were impounded and that, worse for him, so was his car—the car in which he had driven to and from the country. He came back and lost everything, but no criminal offence was committed.

My constituent has not admitted to doing anything wrong and no evidence has been found that he has done anything wrong. He just had a lot of tobacco with him, but within the legal limit. This gentleman has lost his car and can no longer go about his normal business in Leicester. No real explanation has been given for what has happened, which, as I found out from a letter from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, is standard practice—that is, that HM Revenue and Customs has the power to take people's cars away from them, even though no offence has been committed. That is draconian and bizarre. There ought to be a right of appeal, allowing people the opportunity to challenge the decision.

My constituent cannot afford legal representation—as we know, the Government have cut legal aid over the past few years for people in same position as my constituent—so his only recourse is to come to his Member of Parliament. I have written on his behalf, I have received a standard reply from the Exchequer Secretary and apparently that is the end of the matter—he cannot do anything to get his car back. We need to look at the situation, which would never have come to my attention but for my constituent coming to me at my ordinary weekly surgery, because I do not regard myself as an expert in such matters.

Please let us look at the law, and in particular at people's rights of appeal in such circumstances, especially for citizens who are not experts in that area of law and who become totally bewildered when one day they have a car to drive and the next they do not, and there seems to have been no court process in between. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will give me some reassurance that at the very least that case will be examined again and that at most we will examine the law to see whether we can exercise rights of appeal.

Finally, in the traditional way, may I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and other hon. Members a very pleasant summer recess?

1.44 pm

Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I should like to draw attention to yesterday's written ministerial statement, from column 68WS of the *Official Report* onwards, on the Government's determination on the bids that they have received for councils to receive unitary status. I deplore the fact that the Government have made a written statement and that the Ministers concerned did not come to the Floor of the House. Contained in the statement is the fact that the Government are minded to implement the bid on behalf of Exeter city council to become a unitary authority.

I and other hon. Members, on a cross-party basis, met Ministers during the consultation period—in fact, we had a constructive meeting with the Minister concerned. I want to draw attention to the five criteria that the Government have set themselves in deciding what would and would not qualify for unitary status, which are listed at column 69WS. The first criterion states that the bid

"must be...supported by a broad cross section of partners and stakeholders".

Last week I tabled a named day question to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government asking

"whether it is her policy to approve unitary status only for those councils which command broad stakeholder support."

Although the question was meant to have been answered by Tuesday, the Minister for Local Government replied:

"I will answer this question shortly."

I do not know how long "shortly" means in the House, but today is the last day on which we are sitting and the question should have been answered on Tuesday. I checked the letter board before coming into the Chamber and found that as yet I had received no reply.

However, the issue is pertinent in respect of the criteria that have been named yet again in the ministerial statement, because I do not believe that the bid for Exeter commanded the full support of the community that was consulted. In fact, when I receive my reply, I anticipate that the statistics will show that 83 per cent. of the responses that the Government received, including those from members of the public, were against the city of Exeter being made into a unitary authority and that only 14 per cent. were in favour. If that is a true reflection of where the figures lie, there is an obvious reason why the Minister has delayed answering a straightforward question, in the light of the ministerial statement. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House, whom I welcome to her position on the Front Bench, will make it a matter of urgency to ensure that I receive that reply in terms before the close of play today.

Another criterion was that the bid should

"deliver value for money and equity on...services."—[*Official Report*, 25 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 69WS.]

The Government considered bids for unitary status in Lancashire, a large rural county, by both Burnley and Lancaster, but because of the impact on the rest of the county, the Government reckoned at the time—and I think have failed to implement unitary status for this reason—that those bids did not deliver equity on public services. Exactly the same argument can be deployed for the county of Devon, a large rural county with two moors that are national parks, where Torbay and Plymouth already have unitary status.

If we take Exeter out of the Devon equation, we are left with a difficult situation for Exeter, which is far too small to be sustainable as a unitary authority in its own right, not least because there has just been a major restructuring of education in the city of Exeter, which was three-tier and is now two-tier, the cost of which is being borne under a private finance initiative county-wide. If Exeter is given unitary status, the city and the ratepayers of Exeter will have to pick up the long-term implications of that enormous PFI project. I am not just raising the issue from the point of view of a Member of Parliament representing a peripheral rural part of the 600 square miles of my county that abuts the city of Exeter. However, I am particularly concerned about the impact on the whole of Devon, which, if we take Exeter out of the equation is sparsely populated with a population of 93 people per square kilometre.

We must also consider the economies of scale that can be achieved in some of the important services that have to be delivered, especially the complex care services delivered by the primary care trust across a rural area. Economies of scale of expertise can be pooled by the city of Exeter and the rest of the county, and there is clearly a question mark not only over the financial implications of taking Exeter out of the equation but over the subsequent ability to deliver acceptable, good quality services, particularly in an area with a large number of elderly people.

I was not going to raise this issue, but as the matter has come to light today, I must now ask the Minister to ask her colleague to give me an answer to my question as a matter of urgency. The Government's decision about the city of Exeter in today's ministerial statement is profoundly flawed and will almost certainly be challenged. There is cross-party agreement on this, although perhaps not from my neighbour, the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), who holds ministerial office. I imagine that he will be batting for the other side on this matter. These issues cannot be taken in isolation in a county such as ours.

I have watched on television the plight of the many people around the country who have suffered from their homes being flooded in the most dramatic way. I also speak from personal experience. In 1997, my house in Devon, in which I had lived for 30 years, was flooded by an overnight flash flood. It was the first time that it had ever happened. We left the house that night, and were unable to return for five months. It is the most traumatic experience that can happen to anyone.

A lot is being said about the lessons to be learned from building on flood plains. Opinions vary as to whether the recent levels of rainfall are unique, and there was an interesting article in *The Sunday Telegraph* last week by Philip Eden which gave the statistics from the 1960s, '70s and '80s. They showed that we are not experiencing unique levels of rainfall, but we clearly have to take account of what we now know about the predicted climate change when we propose to build on flood plains.

There are proposals to build a new town, Cranbrook, in my constituency, starting with about 3,000 properties and building up to 10,000. It is a pretty big development. An environmental study was carried out into the consequences of building a new town on an area of land, much of which comprises flood plains. The Environment Agency has approved the proposals, saying that although

"current guidance in PPG25 requires developers to avoid development within floodplain defined on the basis of the 1 in a 100 year (1per cent. probability) event,"

it accepts that, in the case of Cranbrook, it would be defined on the basis of a 1 in 1,000- year event, which is much less likely to happen.

The real point, however, with any large-scale development—goodness knows, a whole new town is pretty big—is that a lot depends on whether the infrastructure to help with the drainage, the run-off and all the other problems associated with a lot of new build will be put in place on time. My experience of developments of this scale is that, regardless of any negotiations about the infrastructure to be provided by the builders, that is almost the last thing to happen. We can see the consequences of that, especially as drainage infrastructure needs to be among the first things to be built, rather than the last. That involves spending money up front on the basis that the developers will anticipate getting more contracts to build and that the planning will go ahead as predicted.

I will not rehearse the arguments about whether we should have this new town; that is a battle that I fought and lost many years ago. I will say to the Minister, however, that if we are genuinely to learn lessons, it cannot be acceptable to use predictive figures from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that have been on the books for a long time when planning large developments such as these. When this kind of infrastructure is required, we need to determine at what point in the development the developer should put it in. That will involve ensuring that the firms that win the contracts have the money and resources to provide that infrastructure, because there is often a

[Angela Browning]

question mark over their own viability. They usually want to sell the houses and get the money into the bank before they invest too much in any infrastructure other than the basic bits, usually the roads. If lessons are to be learned from the tragedy that many people have experienced in the past few days, that issue must be looked at, particularly in the context of planning policy guidance note 25.

Finally, Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, members of staff and all colleagues here present and elsewhere a very happy summer recess? Devon awaits you. It is looking glorious, as always. If you want a weekend break or have not yet thought about where to go, the county of Devon will welcome you all.

1.55 pm

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I start by offering my humble apologies to you, to the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons and to the Opposition spokesman? I shall not be able to be here for the winding-up speeches, as I have to go to a local health meeting at a hospital in my constituency. However, I shall read the whole debate with interest.

It is customary to say that we should not adjourn until we have discussed a particular subject. I do want the House to adjourn today, but when we get back, I want us to have a full-scale, grown-up, informed debate on drugs policy, the drugs industry and the drugs trade. I am not talking about pharmaceuticals; I am talking about the illegal drugs trade and its domestic and international ramifications.

I should like to draw to the attention of the House the best book on the subject that I have seen for years. It was published last year, and it is called "The Political Economy of Narcotics" by Julia Buxton, a senior research fellow at the university of Bradford. She gives a history of the subject, along with masses of information and a very good analysis. I got the book from the House of Commons Library, and I can tell that it is a good book because its source, the British Library, demanded it back straight away. I read it through to the end, however, and it should inform the debate. If there is more in-depth analysis of the subject, however, we should bring it forward. Indeed, the Government should bring forward their own in-depth analysis.

Ms Buxton refers to the United Nations and the international drug institutions, and to "institutional crisis and decline". Yet I know, from a parliamentary answer that I have received, that the UK is a major donor to those institutions, and to this failing effort. She refers to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the UN international drug control programme and the International Narcotics Control Board. She talks of

"the inability of the apparatus to revolutionize its working practices or to refocus policy."

Because of the institutions' dependence on donor countries,

"the mechanisms for debate, policy evaluation and review within the UN were limited and this further impeded the reform of UN and drug control approaches."

She goes on to say that,

"while there might be a lively debate on changing aspects of the national drug laws in some countries, the reality is that national governments have very limited room for manoeuvre in terms of developing domestic drug strategies."

Importantly, she concludes:

"This situation is regrettable because the system of international drug control does not work. All the statistical information shows that, rather than decreasing, the number of people who are producing, distributing and consuming harmful drugs is increasing. The expansion of the trade in drugs has been particularly pronounced since the collapse of Soviet communism in the early 1990s and it has accelerated in line with the globalization process. On that basis alone, drug control policies have failed. Not only have they failed, they are also counter-productive...The current control model has not adapted to the enormous changes that have occurred in production and consumption trends during the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, drug control strategies are no longer simply counter-productive; they are doing more harm than good."

Four types of drugs are dealt with in the book: poppy for opium and heroin; coca for cocaine, crack and other derivatives; synthetic-type drugs such as LSD and ecstasy; cannabis and marijuana.

The book also provides valuable information about the financial value of the drugs sector—estimated by the UN as in the region of $300 billion to $500 billion a year, which is more than the market value of steel, cars, pharmaceuticals, meat, chocolate, wine, wheat, coffee and tea. In 2003, the global retail cannabis market was worth an estimated $140 billion a year; cocaine $70 billion; opiates $65 billion; and synthetics $44 billion.

In fact, the lucrative drugs market of north America accounted for 60 per cent. of amphetamine retail sales; 52 per cent. of ecstasy; and 62 per cent. of cocaine sales. That is interesting because America is the country most insistent on the prohibition policy—yet it has the biggest drugs market. What we have seen economically, because of the failure of the control system, is supply up, prices on the street down, demand up. Clearly, the current prohibition policy has failed.

What worries me most is the connection with crime. As with alcohol prohibition, which led to Al Capone and the US mafia, drug prohibition creates the most dangerous organised criminal gangs and threatens civil society beyond just drugs. For example, in Colombia, three presidential candidates were assassinated as a result of the drugs trade. The drugs industry almost went to war with the state in that particular case.

The book notes that drugs prohibition has been advocated by the US Christian evangelists, who also brought in alcohol prohibition: the US likes bans and prohibition. I see that its policy on drugs is "Just say no". That same phrase, by the way, applies to HIV/AIDS in Africa—but again it is not realistic. The British and US Governments have fallen out over that issue and we recommend supplying condoms. America says no to global abortion rights, but abortion should be a right. I note that our International Development Ministers are to address the Marie Stopes conference—again that shows that we are adopting a different position from that in the US. If the US will not change, we should be prepared to adopt a different policy on drugs. The book also points out that US foreign policy takes precedence over its counter-drugs policy. The US will condone drug states or drug players if that is seen to be in its best interests. That factor will be used against whoever the US regards as its enemy.

The drugs industry and the prohibition strategy, which makes it so profitable, lead to wars—Afghanistan is a clear example—and narco-states such as Colombia. That was the status of that country in the past and perhaps still now. The response is unreasonable militarisation and the mass denial of civil liberties; and environmental damage when crops are sprayed. There are also employment and livelihood issues. Bolivia is cited as having almost half a million people—16 per cent. of the work force at one point—employed in the drug industry. As we know from Afghanistan, people often have no other feasible livelihood. While the trade remains illegal, producers get a good price and the process is highly organised. There would be a better chance for alternative production to be pursued if the bottom were to fall out of the market.

Julia Buxton says that the prohibition conventions of international organisations are out of date. They were brought in before the HIV/AIDS epidemic, before the collapse of communism and before globalisation. She argues that they spread harm while the real policy should be one of reducing harm. She refers to HIV/AIDS and drugs in prisons. Clean needle supply would help to combat the disease, and even safe supply could be justified. That would be better than the current practice, which ends up causing more HIV/AIDS as a result of dirty needles. The choice does not have to be between total prohibition or total liberalisation; Julia Buxton suggests that we could have a third way through regulation and an element of control. That is attractive because it would remove the worst of the criminality.

Let the House consider the equivalent industries that are also often viewed as unsavoury. There is the sex industry, for example. There are some bans, quite rightly in some respects, but that industry is not totally banned; indeed, most of it is legal and highly profitable, however unsavoury. The arms industry—most of us detest it—is not illegal; it is regulated. Tobacco is another example; it is legal, but we are quite rightly imposing ever more constraints on it. Alcohol is licensed. There is a third way, a third option, that could be adopted for drugs policy.

Whenever this matter is discussed, the debate is seldom thorough. It is all about soundbites—a simple matter of whether we are tough or soft on drugs. I admit that drugs have an impact on our streets and even in people's homes when it affects their loved ones. It is, of course, a political issue, but we need to have a proper debate about it. I believe that we need to do what is best for public health and for society as a whole. I urge the House to have that discussion.

2.6 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I shall limit my remarks to the time recommended by Mr. Deputy Speaker in order to maximise the opportunity for all colleagues to contribute to the debate. I would like to put one national issue—mentioned earlier in the announcement of forthcoming business—on the agenda and then discuss issues related to my part of London.

On the national issue, I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will give us an update on whether active consideration is being given to the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils on hunger strike in Harmondsworth, which is causing great concern not just in the Tamil community, but more widely. The case is predictable; it is about people who are afraid to go back to their own country, given the terrible civil war. Many of us would encourage the new team at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to put Sri Lanka high on its agenda. It used to be British; it is a Commonwealth country; it is a great country—but it will be a truly great country only when it has become peaceful for all the communities living there, whether Simla, Tamil or others. I am sure that we all share that objective.

Moving on to issues about London, my borough has a population of between 200,000 and 250,000. Like all inner-London boroughs, a significant increase in population is projected over the next 10 years. The official figures show that, but last night's Adjournment debate suggested that they may well be underestimates and that the real figures are much higher.

In that context, housing is, as always, a huge London issue. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will confirm that the good words about housing, particularly council housing, in the Government's recent statements represent a willingness to talk to boroughs and local housing authorities about the ability to build more council housing if that is what the people and their elected representatives want. There should no longer be any disincentives against council housing, forcing people to go down other routes. Council housing is often as well built and as well managed as any other housing. Our borough has the largest council housing stock in London, with more than 40,000 rented properties and another 20,000 bought under the right-to-buy arrangements. All three parties in the borough are determined to sustain that; we are all committed to that means of continuing to meet housing needs.

In that context—and in the context of the great environmental debate—we would also like the Government to think more about funding not just decent homes initiatives, as they have done across England, but environmental initiatives that would allow the best heating systems and the least wasteful energy systems to be used. We have district heating systems, but they are old style. If we are to make properties for the future, we need, bluntly, to retrofit new combined heat and power systems. That has a cost, and we would be willing to work with Government to make sure that we pilot such proposals on estates such as the Four Squares, the Manor and the Rennie, which are old but have decent homes. If they had modern heating that did not waste energy, that would be progress.

Secondly, I want to raise a health issue. South London Members of Parliament, my friend the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) who is present, and all other Members who represent Southwark and Lambeth seats, kept telling the previous Prime Minister's Administration that it was a bad idea to endorse the closure of the 24-hour emergency clinic for the mentally ill at the Maudsley hospital on Denmark hill—the most well known London and national hospital for mental illness. Sadly, that 24-hour clinic has been closed. A promise had been made to open decent alternative facilities on the King's college site

[Simon Hughes]

that would separate the mentally ill and non-mentally ill. That has not happened, and it does not look as though it will. I hope that Health Ministers will reconsider that decision, and I have written to the Secretary of State to that effect. A review is needed. Tonight, I hope to present another petition from users of those facilities and their friends and families. It is not appropriate to deal with difficult mentally ill patients at one of the busiest accident and emergency departments in London and Britain.

Thirdly, given the announcements made, many parliamentary colleagues have post office closures looming in their constituencies. My request relates to a Crown post office in my constituency that has an uncertain future. A few post offices, of which Borough high street is one, have had a stay of closure without an outcome, and further closures of sub-post offices around the country are in prospect. Before we start having discussions and are given the list, will the Government at least insist that the Post Office provide the facts that we need to evaluate the case? The Post Office has been dreadful at sharing the facts; it always says that it cannot tell us. We cannot engage in debate if we do not know how many users a post office has, or what its turnover is. If we get the facts, we can have an honest debate about the relative merits of post offices. The four Crown post offices in my patch have been much busier since the sub-post offices that previously existed were closed. The facts need to be provided, and then I will happily engage in debate in defence of my remaining post offices.

Lastly, I want to raise issues relating to transport, including train, tram and tube services. On trains, the Secretary of State for Transport's welcome announcement on Tuesday about investment in the railways left in abeyance the issue of whether London will get Crossrail. There is a united cross-party view that London transport will be hugely better if it has an east-west link. We urge the Government to come down on the side of investment in Crossrail sooner rather than later. I know that the private Bill is going through the House, but a green light for Crossrail is needed soon.

Another major, strategic London-related announcement was on Thameslink, which is to have a £5.5 billion investment. That north-south link goes through my constituency, crossing Blackfriars bridge. Thameslink is a very good idea, but has one problem, which I have raised over and again—the threat posed to Borough market and the area around Southwark cathedral by the impact of the scheme. I put on record that if Network Rail and Thameslink are to sustain the support of the community—but more importantly, protect one of London's heritage sites that has associations with Dickens, a cathedral at London bridge that goes back 1,400 years and Borough market, which is wholesale and retail—an inappropriate viaduct and the demolition of lots of listed buildings is not the way to proceed. There must be ways of accommodating the double-width viaduct without destroying the heritage of that wonderful part of London. Huge support has been received from across parties and from people all over the world who are worried about Borough market. Let us say yes to Thameslink, but to a Thameslink that does not ruin Borough market. We cannot rebuild history or remake Dickensian, historic London.

On the tram, I want to make a plea for the comprehensive funding review to direct adequate funding to Transport for London for good London projects, which would significantly reduce congestion, motoring and environmental harm. The first proposal in that regard is the cross-river tram, which is widely supported. London currently has two tram proposals in the pipeline: the Uxbridge road tram, which is not very popular; and the north-south London tram, which would go from Camden Town in the north down to Peckham and Brixton in the south, crossing Waterloo bridge and going through my constituency at Elephant and Castle, for which a fantastic new regeneration scheme has been announced this week. We need to know that the money is available to do it. If TfL has the money, the Mayor will say yes. My understanding is that if Crossrail gets the green light, and the money is there for one tram, it is likely that we can have the north-south London tram, because an east-west train will not be needed as much if we get Crossrail. That is logical.

People north of the river—in the posher bits of Camden, I understand—might be a bit nervous about the thought of a tram going past their exclusive houses and giving them grief in some of the leafier squares. I hope that that problem can be resolved. Even posh people can go on trams and benefit from them. People with expensive houses might even see their house prices going up, not down. Can we at least have the money to allow us to have what is not a cross-river tram if it stops south of the river, having started south of the river? We want the tram to go from Brixton and Peckham to Waterloo, and at least over to Aldwych. If the good burghers—I use my words carefully—of Camden do not want it to go further north than the Aldwych, that is their problem; they are mistaken.

Finally, London has two tube issues, which are not merely related to south London. South London has 38 tube stations, and north London has 200—a gross inequity, as I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House will agree. On the first issue, everyone agrees that the extension of the East London line is a good project, which is waiting for the funds to be continued. Work is starting, and the line will close later in the year as preparations are made. In the first phase, it will run from Dalston junction down to New Cross, Crystal Palace and West Croydon; at the moment, it just goes from Shoreditch to New Cross and New Cross Gate. The second phase will eventually take it to Clapham junction via Surrey Canal Road. It will link all the bits of the system that are not currently linked. One will therefore be able to get on to the East London line via the Victoria line at Brixton, for example.

It will be no good, however, if the comprehensive spending review does not provide the money. I am a big fan of the line, which will hugely reduce traffic in east London. A lot of people will be able to go to Canary Wharf from south London—crossing the river is difficult, because there are not many crossing points. It would be a hugely valuable investment, so may I make a big plea that Transport for London be given enough money to allow the East London line to go ahead as planned?

The second tube issue relates to Metronet and its consequences. The Prime Minister has done many good things in his political career, but one of the bad things that he did was to insist on the public-private partnership for the London underground. That was always going to come to grief, and it has; and Metronet has come to grief. The impact of that is that all the restoration work, and the work on the lines affected, including the Bakerloo line at Elephant and Castle, is at risk because we do not know who will be doing it. Will the Deputy Leader of the House please take back to her colleagues, including the Prime Minister, the new Chancellor and the new Transport Secretary, the message that such a scheme cannot be allowed again? More importantly, we need the security that any scheme will be viable for all its users, if we are to have confidence in the London tube.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): I was shadow Minister for London at the time that that scheme was being discussed, and it was as clear as day that consortiums put together with £2 share capital do not have the balance sheets to support the deficits that they will inevitably run into. The result is that the problem comes back to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Should not the Government at least let such contracts to proper companies with proper balance sheets that can underwrite the cost overruns, which are probably their fault in any case?

Simon Hughes: I am grateful for the informed intervention of the hon. Gentleman. What Londoners and the millions who visit London want is an arrangement for the involvement of the public and private sectors, if that is appropriate, or for the involvement of the public sector alone that does not carry all the risks that the current scheme had from the beginning. The workers in the London underground, the users of the London underground and local residents want the same mistakes to be avoided. It is no good replacing one failed arrangement with a parallel failing, risky arrangement. Please heed the warnings from around the House. It is not a party political matter. Warnings came from everywhere.

If we are to have a London that is fit for purpose, we need a tube service, a tram system, bus services and rail services that work, so that when the Olympics come to London, we have a fantastic city that works. I hope that the Minister will heed the constructive suggestions that have been made today, take them back to her colleagues and come back with good news for Londoners and for transport in London.

2.21 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North) (Lab): Even the most fervent or rabid fans of the school academy programme would find it hard to justify the fact that Heartsease high school in my constituency could be turned into such an academy. The two sponsors have each put money into the programme—up to £2 million. One is a Pentecostal ex-car dealer and the other is the Bishop of Norwich. It seems to be a phenomenon raging across the country these days. Nevertheless, we are in the middle of a consultation, which ends on 20 August, from which we will find out the views of at least some of the people in my constituency.

I will not bore hon. Members with all the honeyed words that are said about the aim of such academies and schools: providing a lovely new building, which is welcome, and making a contribution to people's lives and so on. We have all seen those words. I do not think that I would find anyone who would ever disagree with that, whatever position they took. The school no longer appertains to be a faith school. I say that because, in its original documentation, it said:

"there is an opportunity to support an academy in Heartsease. This derives from our faith that the love of God should be seen in our lives"

in such a lively school. That has changed as the opposition has grown. It is now to be an open academy of the best sort and to be socially non-divisive—ethnic, and religious diversity will be the flavour of the month.

I should say too that it is a school that can improve; it has had trouble in the past. That was the original criterion for such academies. Let me quote from its Ofsted report following its hard years. In February 2007, inspectors said:

"This is a satisfactory and improving school. It has overcome significant turbulence caused by recent changes to headship"—

somebody whom I taught at university—

"and governance and it is now much more stable"

and there is a great spirit. It also interacts through the sixth form with the local Blyth-Jex high school and Sprowston high school. With the new middle school and early entry to secondary schools, there will be more pupils there than ever. I will say more about that later.

One wonders about the vision for the school, because it is not always clear. When we enter discussions with the sponsors and others they say that they are going to have environmentalism—well, everyone says that these days—but they do not define exactly what that means in teaching in a school. They are of course to have their specialism, which is engineering. The school achieved specialist status in engineering. It is pretty rare in this country to take that on. It is a hard area to get people interested in, but by gosh when they do get into it they are interested and go on to universities and other places. The vision of how those things will merge has not been spelled out clearly and we have not seen any documentation explaining it.

On a wide range of value-added measures of attainment, the school is among the most improved in the country. It has improved at all key stages. It dispirits people when they see that that is not rewarded and that perhaps many of the teachers and others will lose their jobs. It will have its new glossy buildings, presumably, and its ICT facilities and it might raise standards, but the question is how those standards will be raised. Will it be by diversion of pupils from other schools into the academy because of the attraction of it? Will it really be because of the Christian ethos and what is taught there—sustainable development or whatever? Will that bring people to that school to raise the numbers from about 600 to perhaps 900? They will have to come from the other schools in that district.

One thing that has really established Norwich schools has been the interaction between them. Norwich is not north and south; that is only a constituency matter and two MPs. There is a unitary educational system, where the schools work together and through the years they have interchanged heads

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

and helped each other. The products from our schools—the young people—go on to do excellent work elsewhere; that is second to none. Therefore, social grounds alone may have helped to develop that school.

I am also concerned about the questionnaire that has gone out, which is quite interesting. If ever there were a questionnaire that you wanted to fail, this is it. The questions are biased and loaded. It is amazing. I will take just one example:

"Do you agree with the sponsor's vision for the proposed new Academy? 'We believe in the unique worth of each child'. Yes, No, Undecided".

Who could ever be undecided about that kind of question? There are 16 questions just like that, for which the obvious answer is that Heartsease school, as it is now, is rubbish and we need an academy to make it better. No reasons are given. It is just pushing people in that direction. Many people have pointed that out. I am amazed that a county council—Norfolk county council—can allow such a questionnaire to go out in its name. I wonder as well about the Christian sponsors allowing that to happen.

One other thing gravitates against giving the school academy status. Yesterday, there was a statement—it has already been referred to—that unitary status is coming Norwich's way. There is an argument about how it will come. It is not in one of the nine primary areas to which we were minded to give unitary status; the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) mentioned Exeter in that connection. Norwich is singled out and it is said that if we can widen the boundaries just outside Norwich—there is no green belt there now; areas have all merged together—to territory such as Sprowston and Hellesdon, we really have a chance to meet the five criteria. Everything I hear indicates that there is great hope that that might happen. That means that the local education authority loses its right to look after those schools, including Heartsease, Blyth-Jex and Sprowston. That reflects a difference from where we started, taking one school out of the system and trying to make it very different. It would be divisive to do such a thing in the current situation. I hope that the Minister will listen when we meet him to discuss that issue. Unitary status changes everything.

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has made some authentic claims about changing the criteria for academies, not dramatically but just enough. He said that it is just not enough to have a lot of money to be a good sponsor. One has to show leadership, innovation and commitment to act in the public interest. If one is going to run education, it would help to know a little about it before taking those responsibilities on. That is beginning to change, in terms of how the academy programme is rolling out across the country. There is a long way to go, but people are beginning to realise that sponsorship may not be the way to develop better standards in education. There may be better ways, such as addressing the size of the school or the interaction between schools. If someone gave me £25 million, I could take those three schools into the stratosphere, including Nobel prizes or whatever.

Schools need better buildings and playing fields. The science labs at Sprowston high school are mediaeval. I had a meeting the other week with the director of education for the county and we showed him the appalling labs. The wooden desks have things like "Tony loves Cherie" scrawled all over them. We used to love such desks, but labs in good schools now look completely different. All those schools need an investment of money, and to interact with each other. That has started to happen with the sixth forms and it could happen in other areas of school endeavour.

I also wish to raise a point that someone made recently in a big meeting about academies, and that is the human rights of people in academies. Are they covered by the 1944 Education Act and the rest of the 9 ft pile of legislation and regulations on education and grant-maintained schools and the rest? A lawyer from the eminent Matrix chambers, which I seem to remember hearing of somewhere before, said that that has not been tested yet, so that is another problem.

I do not think that the academy proposal has been considered in terms of value for the £25 million that the sponsor gets to do what they like, such as appointing governors and so on. Because of the unitary status situation, it will take time to discuss with other local councils how they can work better together and how the schools and other services will be taken from the county council and brought under the umbrella of the unitary authority. In those circumstances, I call for a moratorium on the academy programme. The judgments that have been made so far are unsound, such as the questionnaire that I have mentioned. If one looks at the education situation in the round, the academy proposal will not give us a well funded, accountable or fair school system in my part of Norwich.

2.31 pm

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): I wish to raise three subjects, and I shall end with the one on which the Government could act before 1 August.

The first subject goes back some way to the unfair treatment of pensioners from this country who choose to live overseas. Many people believe that the arguments that successive Governments have used are wrong. Brian Havard of Australia has pointed out that he has lost £30,000 since he retired there. Another resident of Australia, aged 96, is getting a state pension from this country of £6 a week, but it would be £70 to £100 a week if she had chosen to go and live in the Philippines rather than in an old British dominion. I do not expect the Minister to be able to do more than to say that she has heard what I have said, but it is a scandal that gets worse with the passing years. It is time that Government woke up and said that whatever the other spending priorities may be, pensioners should get the same north of the 49th parallel as in the United States, in another European Union country or in South Africa. People should be treated fairly.

The second issue is one to which I have given a great deal of time and attention. It is the proposed reconfiguration of hospitals in West Sussex. I pay tribute to the chairman of the primary care trust, David Taylor, who has resigned today for personal reasons. I do not believe that his resignation is linked to

the fact that the health oversight committee yesterday referred the consultation to the Secretary of State on the grounds of inadequate and improper procedures. I accept what the chairman said and I wish him well.

I suggest—although he is in my party—that the Government appoint as chairman of the PCT someone such as Henry Smith, the leader of West Sussex county council. He would approach the issues in a proper way. He has led the council well and he would be able to get the consultation halted and then put back on course properly.

It is unprecedented for the first meeting of a joint health and oversight committee to take the action that that one did, and the Government should take it seriously. If they say that it is nothing to do with them and that the strategic health authority should make the decision, they should give direction to the chief executive of the SHA to try to get the consultation working properly. I shall not take the House through all the issues, but the representations made to the former Secretary of State for Health have not apparently been referred to the PCT as part of its consultation. The thousands of representations made to the PCT in the year that it took to come out with its inadequate consultation get no more than a passing reference.

Many of the clinicians, including those who got standing ovations at the meeting in Worthing a few days ago, have made a declaration that the proposals were not safe, and that—apparently—has allowed others to claim that the clinicians are agreed that there can be only one major hospital on the south coast in West Sussex.

The county of West Sussex has a population of 750,000 and there will be 3,000 births at Worthing hospital this year. The former Prime Minister, who thought it worth bypassing one's local hospital for special primary angioplasty treatment, should know that if he wanted that treatment he could have it in Worthing, where our surgeons are of world renown. At a meeting of the all-party health group, some of us heard Professor Sir George Alberti and another Government adviser, Roger Boyle, agree with Mark Signy of Worthing hospital that treatment there is more likely to save a patient's life than if they journeyed to hospitals in Brighton, Chichester or Portsmouth.

The inadequacies of the consultation are well known locally and to the PCT, too. As an example, it was decided to recommend three options. A fourth was cut out at the last moment—my belief is that it was done on the instructions of the SHA or the Department of Health, but I cannot prove it. There has been some dispute as to whether the consultation document was submitted to the Department of Health for approval before it was released. It was certainly released later than anyone expected, but that is in the past so there is not much point in going over it again.

The consultation should include an option for two hospitals with accident and emergency and maternity services. There are good arguments for Princess Royal hospital in Haywards Heath, but to make people decide between St. Richard's hospital at Chichester and the Worthing and Southlands hospitals in my constituency is wrong. The fourth option—knocked out at the last moment—should have been included, which, like the first option, includes a benefit to the NHS of more than £20 million, but because it would be at Portsmouth in Hampshire it is not counted in the financial calculations. The Minister would have to look in a small box on page 7 of the fifth document attached to the seventh item of the PCT agenda to find it.

The PCT should also be required to reinstate one of the Government's accessibility hurdles, which was dropped in March without anybody noticing. I should be surprised if any non-executive directors of the PCT understood what was happening at the time. What is proposed is wrong. Worthing has one of the best hospitals in the country. People want to be patients there. Staff want to work there and people want to be trained there. I declare a slight interest, as my doctor daughter was trained at the hospital.

My daughter is not the reason why I raise the next issue, which is the total mess of the Government's nationalised scheme for choosing doctors for hospital training posts. In November and December 2006, there were warnings, in which I took part, that the modernising medical careers system and the computerised medical training application system—MTAS—would not work. In March, sensible directors of medical education advised deaneries that they should hold the system for a year and process applications manually. If that had happened, we would have known about, almost every hospital position by May. Those positions are for the benefit not just of doctors in training but for patients. They also enable senior doctors to do their work properly rather than downgrading themselves to jobs that require less experience and skill.

The Government did not heed those warnings. We have reached the stage of resignations—not only of the chairman of the BMA and of some of the people who helped design the system, but of the Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), who left her job for personal reasons, which we can well understand. The junior Minister responsible for some of those things has moved on to another post. The Select Committee on Health is to hold an inquiry and the Tooke inquiry is under way, but I should prefer Ministers to say, "We realise the whole thing is a total mess. We went on regardless and we were wrong." The Minister will discover the strength of what is wrong if she asks Great Ormond street hospital whether it is true that it has up to 12 vacancies for posts that need to be filled on 1 August.

We are used to flood warnings, but we are getting to the stage where we should put out a warning saying, "Do not be ill in August." That is not just because people are changing their jobs everywhere in the country and many vacancies will not be filled, but because many of those that are filled will be filled by people who did not want to have that specialty in that place. Imagine what it is like to be one of the people who is actually given a job that they did want in a place that they wanted, only to be told two weeks after receiving that news, "I am sorry; we made a mistake. We have offered six places for four posts, and two of you have to be picked to go elsewhere to do something totally different." That is not the way to treat a committed professional, on whom this country has spent perhaps £250,000.

The same applies to people referred to as IMGs—international medical graduates: people who came to

[Peter Bottomley]

this country to do A-levels, their first degree and their medical training. As a result of a change of policy by the Home Office in March 2006, brought about apparently by the Department of Health either conniving or being ignorant about the consequences, those people found out that by late last year a decision had been taken, without full information to everyone who would be affected, that it was now not enough to have a letter from the Home Office in order to switch to the highly skilled migrant programme, and that a stamp in one's passport was also required. Given the delays at the Home Office, one would not only have to have applied, having obtained the qualifications to get the FT3 grade that gets one above the salary level that makes it possible to apply for the highly skilled migrant programme, but would have to have got in the queue where they open the letter and put the stamp in. A letter from the Home Office was judged not to be adequate.

What kind of a Government say that one Department can send a letter saying that a person is qualified whereas another can say, "Unless you actually turn that letter into a stamp in your passport by 5 February, you cannot take up a job on 1 August"? I would be ashamed of that and I expect that, privately, both Ministers and the officials involved are ashamed. It is wrong.

Some specialties, such as pediatrics and psychiatry, normally rely on international medical graduates. I suggest that the new Secretary of State goes down to the airport and tries to stop some of those people leaving the country. They may have been in this country for seven or eight years but they are needed here. I challenge the Government to publish during the next week, even though Parliament may have gone off on holiday, the figures for every deanery, hospital, specialty and grade, and to say where the gaps are and how many doctors are trying to enter the transfer system, where they can swap with someone else. For example, someone with a job in Scotland may want to be down in Kent. How can they swap? It is a shambles of a system and I am ashamed to be part of it. We as MPs have failed.

On a different subject, during the break I am going to America to help win a clemency hearing for a man called Krishna Maharaj. The former Prime Minister mentioned him. Several members of the present Cabinet signed up to the amicus curiae brief signed by nearly 300 MPs and MEPs in the House of Lords. I hope that I can come back knowing that Florida will grant a clemency hearing to this man and have a full investigation. If he cannot be ordered a new trial, at least he can get the clemency hearing that he richly deserves.

2.43 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The first issue that I shall raise has already been raised by the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes). That is no surprise, because it is the question of the closure of the emergency clinic at the Maudsley hospital. All the Members of Parliament in south London, the two local authorities of different political persuasions and health scrutiny committees of different political persuasion united to say that they did not want it closed and that they did not want it moved to an inferior position at King's College hospital. The former Secretary of State for Health did not listen to any words that we said. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will make a point of drawing this matter to the attention of the new Secretary of State for Health even though that has already been done.

The local paper, the *South London Press*, has led a very good campaign on this issue, and has really got people in south London to see mental health issues as central to the problems that many of my constituents and other Members in south London face. Each week now in the *South London Press* we read of people who have been treated very badly indeed, and we read of the bureaucracy that is involved in that change. And yet £6 million was going to be spent, although it has not been spent yet, to move a service that nobody wanted moved. I still do not understand the reasoning behind that.

I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made three changes in the last week or two, and all of them are on issues on which I voted against my own Government—on the questions of cannabis, casinos and 24-hour licensing. I am hopeful that, over the next few weeks and perhaps by the time that we come back in the autumn, there will be more changes on policies on which I was against the Government and on which they have now seen the error of their ways. I hope that the new Secretary of State will look again at the issue that I have raised, because it is not too late to change.

I also wish to draw to the House's attention the way in which the ballots for arm's length management organisations are carried out and I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will refer it to whichever Minister is responsible for monitoring the conduct of those ballots. There has recently been a ballot in Lambeth for an ALMO and I was ashamed by the way that my borough handled it. The ballot form was biased and set out in a way that was clearly one-sided. Something like £400,000 was spent on glossy brochures, DVDs and all sorts of other things that were sent to tenants, and they amounted to propaganda as to why the tenants should have their housing put out to an ALMO. Despite all that, there were questions such as

"Are you aware that the ALMO could attract over £200 million of additional investment to make homes decent in Lambeth?

Yes No Don't know

Are you aware that with the ALMO for Lambeth you will remain tenants and leaseholders of the Council?

Yes No Don't know".

The whole ballot form was not in any way a fair way to ask tenants' opinions, especially after the expenditure of £300,000.

Ironically, of the 30,986 council housing tenants and residents who had the right to vote, the total number of valid votes cast was 8,278. Of that, the number voting yes was 3,518, the number voting no was 3,362 and the number voting "don't know" was 1,398. The council leadership portrayed that as a great victory for the ALMO and claimed that it had received the support of 52 per cent. of the tenants voting. However, when we add the figures up, we see that a minority of the people voting voted for an ALMO. I ask the Deputy of Leader of the House to make sure that the Minister responsible is made aware of that.

Although we need extra resources to improve the homes in my borough, setting up a bureaucratic way of proceeding is not what residents and tenants want. I hope that Ministers will study that carefully and realise that Lambeth council would have done much better to spend its money and resources on improving the repair system and the whole system for the management of housing rather than on paying overtime to extra staff to knock on doors so many times that the residents told them to go away and locked their doors. Lambeth might then have had the chance to become a two-star housing authority, which it is not.

Instead of Lambeth council wasting money, it could have campaigned for the fourth option of direct investment in local authority housing. That is needed and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is moving towards greater support for council housing. I am fed up with the terms "affordable housing" and "social housing". Let us get back to using the term "council housing", because that is what people mean when they talk about improving some of the housing. It does not mean that other types of housing cannot be built, but people know what council housing means and that is what we want.

The House should not adjourn until it has debated another issue. For 150 years, we had a wonderful universal postal service that was carried out by the Royal Mail. It was the envy of the world, with low, uniform stamp prices and six-day deliveries. I believe that the rapid introduction of full liberalisation in January 2006—well ahead of all other European countries—has created an unlevel competitive playing field for the Royal Mail that is now threatening its commercial viability and the future of the universal service. Postcomm has not carried out its duty very well in allowing foreign competitors to enter the UK market while denying the same opportunity for Royal Mail to compete in Europe. As the Communication Workers Union predicted, competition has amounted to cherry picking and to allowing the private competitors to cream off the Royal Mail's most profitable bulk mail business. Real competition has proved a myth, with no other competitor being prepared to develop a national collection and do all the things that we are so used to with Royal Mail.

Those who run Royal Mail, Mr. Leighton and—I've forgotten his name, but I do know him. *[Interruption.]* Mr. Crozier. They have got themselves into a situation where they are refusing to negotiate properly with the Communication Workers Union. I have a long association with the Communications Workers Union, dating back to when it was the old Union of Communication Workers, and I know that the people who work for the Post Office do not want to strike. However, the Royal Mail has handled the situation appallingly. It goes on about huge salary increases for its workers, who actually earn a small amount, while people such as Crozier award themselves huge amounts of extra money every year. Over the summer, the Government need to get involved, address the issue, and knock some heads together at Royal Mail.

There are two final issues that I would like to mention. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) will probably have more to say about one of them. It is quite wrong that we are going off for the long recess without having a proper debate on the need for a referendum on the European Union constitution. For me, it is still a constitution. It is disgraceful that, unless it has been produced today, we still have not seen an English edition of the so-called constitutional treaty. It is quite clear that the vast majority of the original 250 proposals in that constitution are there in black and white as they were before. A very strong commitment was given in the manifesto that I stood on that we would have a referendum on that constitution, and we need a referendum. The demands for that will grow over the summer. Before we come back in the autumn, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will change his mind on that, as we changed our minds on the original referendum—unfortunately, we were not able to have that referendum because other countries voted against the constitution.

Finally, a lot of my constituents will be travelling this summer. They will be flying off and using the airports. I want to put in a word for some kind of reality check on the question of terrorism and the various measures that have been introduced. I am absolutely certain that one of the things that the terrorists want to do is to change our way of life and to change the basic idea in this country that we do things within the law and we do not change our behaviour too much. I am afraid that, as a constant traveller—quite often I go back and forward to Northern Ireland, where there is no alternative but to fly—I have noticed the attitude and the way in which people handle the security process. Quite honestly, if anyone wanted to do something, they would simply do it around the long queues at check-in and security.

The Government have to allow a more common-sense approach to hand luggage. I had a tiny bottle of blackberry jam, which my mother made, taken off me because it was slightly bigger than the size of blackberry jam bottle that I would have been allowed to carry. There is no common sense in the attitude to the kind of measures that are being taken. Unless we take people with us on the measures, people will react. Although everyone wants to see normal security carried out, they do not want to see more and more people acting as if they just quite enjoy having a little bit of power over ordinary people. I hope that, over the summer, Transport Ministers do not react too much to suggestions that there should be even tighter security. We should take a common sense approach and recognise that the answer to terrorism does not lie in just making the lives of everybody in this country more difficult.

I am sure that many other Members want to speak. May I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and all the staff a good long recess? We London MPs do not disappear off; we are usually seen wandering around the House of Commons where lots of work is going on, because we do not go off unless we are actually on holiday.

2.55 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on a common-sense speech. We all admire her independent spirit, and I hope that she gets her way on a referendum, as she has done on other matters, such as casinos, now that the new Prime Minister has taken over.

[Mr. John Horam]

I should like to raise a subject that will be of interest to the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes), who spoke earlier, namely health care in south London. More particularly, I want to discuss the disturbing financial situation of the Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust. The trust has two hospitals: the Princess Royal University hospital in Farnborough, and a smaller hospital—a community hospital in effect—the Orpington hospital. The PRU, as it is known locally, is a brand-new private finance initiative hospital that opened four years ago. It was financed by land sales and a PFI scheme.

When the PRU was built, part of the original plan was that the Orpington hospital would be closed down, despite it being a community hospital, and its buildings would be used to house the trust's accounts department. With the help of a magnificent, formidable group of ladies in my constituency, who run an organisation called the Community Care Protection Group, I petitioned against the change, under the slogan "beds before bookkeepers", and managed to save Orpington hospital, which is one of my greatest triumphs as a Member of Parliament. I give the Government great credit for the fact that the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and something else—[Hon. Members: "Regulatory Reform."]—yes, reducing regulation or something, opened a new treatment centre four years ago, on which the Government spent £8 million of taxpayers' money. I therefore have a brand-new PFI hospital and a community hospital, both of which are four years old, so we have excellent new facilities in my constituency, and I give the Government credit for that.

All seemed to be going well, even over the past year, although, as we know, there is a £500 million deficit in the NHS countrywide, and 20,000 nurses and others have been laid off. There are difficulties across the country, but the fact is that in Bromley patients were very satisfied with the new facilities. The staff morale was good, and the nurses and clinicians do a terrific job. High recommendations came from the Government. The possibility of foundation status was mooted and worked towards. More and more stars were allocated, and all seemed to be going well. It was recognised that the financial situation was perhaps a little challenging, but it was understood that the operating deficit was under control, and would be eliminated this year.

Imagine our horror when the new management of the trust revealed, in the past two months, that there was in fact an £87 million deficit, and that the financial situation demanded a cut of £20 million in the current financial year. That has staggered everybody in the local community, as the Deputy Leader of the House can well imagine. I have been trying to find out the exact reason for that abrupt volte-face, and as far as I can see, it is first down to a very bad PFI deal. I have looked at the appendices attached to "A Picture of Health"—it always amazes me that the Government have jolly little titles to conceal very uncomfortable facts—and it says that the occupation costs of the PRU are very high; indeed, they are double what they would be under conventional public-sector financing. They are so high that they are worse than those for most other PFI hospitals, and I understand that that is because it was an early PFI scheme, so the hospital got a worse deal than some others did.

In the circumstances, one would expect a refinancing of the debt. Indeed, that took place when the construction was completed, but it has finished, and the downside of the refinancing is that the debt arrangements will remain the same for the next 35 years. There can be no further change in the debt arrangements. The banks and so on that picked up the debt get their interest, uprated for the retail prices index every year, and there is no risk transfer whatever. Now that the hospital is in financial trouble, there is no possibility of them taking up some of the slack. They get their money anyway. It is astonishing that there has been no risk transfer in the whole of the PFI operation, as there has not been in many others.

Bonds were used in the refinancing and because the bond-holders are difficult to locate, there can be no leasing out of the facilities, which would otherwise be a possibility in such a situation. The financial position is bad and it gets worse. Recognising the difficulties brought about by the hospital financing situation, the Government gave Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust an annual sum of £6 million to cover the difficulties. That has been abruptly withdrawn, and we do not know why.

Will the Minister ask her colleagues in the Department of Health why that substantial sum—£6 million out of an operating deficit of possibly £20 million—has been abruptly withdrawn with no explanation? The hospital management, to whom I spoke last week, does not know why and is trying to find out. I do not know. I hope the Government know why that extraordinary action was taken.

The Government have put in place a new tariff system for the recovery of health costs throughout the country. That is based on average cost. The problem is that Bromley NHS trust has above average costs. It is therefore providing many items and carrying out many clinical jobs at a loss, thereby contributing to its operating deficit.

As a consequence of all this, the Government have looked at all these matters in south-east London as a whole on a cash basis and are no longer prepared to consider the sort of financial devices that carried hospital trusts in that situation from one year to another. They will no longer contemplate that, presumably because they are running out of money to finance the NHS, as a result of all the bungles that have occurred over doctors' salaries, IT, the legacy of extra bureaucracy and so forth. There is an acute financial crisis.

In addition, as London Members know, there is the plan to transfer health treatment from hospitals to community care. Lord Darzi has brought forward that scheme for London. The problem in Bromley is, first, that we have all those brand-new facilities—two new hospitals—and the Government are telling us not to use them so much and to transfer treatment to the community. Secondly, we do not have very good community care facilities. In a recent survey the GP surgeries in Bromley are rated the fourth worst in the country. They are very old fashioned. Often a Victorian house has been used for many years by a single-handed or perhaps a two or three-handed GP practice and

cannot take on board all the additional facilities and treatments that the primary care trust wishes it to offer.

The PCT says that it is still giving the hospitals trust the same amount of money. Indeed, it is, in theory, but it is asking for more treatments to be carried out in the community and fewer to be carried out by hospitals. In the end the hospital gets less money. That is also contributing to its cash crisis.

A bad financial situation was set up, to which poor resource planning contributed, and a blueprint for health care which is inappropriate to the circumstances of Bromley has been imposed. I shall be campaigning against that so that the situation does not affect my constituents adversely, and to retain the facilities that we greatly value in Bromley and Orpington. They are much loved by local people, who have received excellent health care there over the past few years, which I wish them to continue to receive. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will tell her colleagues in the House of Commons and in the Government that that is a perfect example of bungling incompetence ruining potentially good health care facilities, and I hope that she will do something about it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have an appalling confession: the assumptions on which the 12-minute time limit were based have proved to be over-optimistic. I want to try to accommodate every hon. Member who is here. I could do that by invoking the short speech rule at the appropriate time, which would mean a seven-minute limit for the remaining speakers, but if everyone adheres to a nine-minute limit from now on—I cannot compel that—it may be possible to avoid having to step down at 4.30 pm. I hope that that helps the House, and I am sorry that the difficulty may arise.

3.6 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): In this debate, it is customary to raise constituency issues, but I do not want to do that this afternoon. I want to debate a Government Green Paper and a document that is not yet available, because this is the last opportunity before the summer recess to do so.

The Green Paper "The Governance of Britain" is excellent and I welcome it. In it, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House commit themselves to much greater involvement by the public and Parliament in our constitutional decisions. They state that they

"want to forge a new relationship between government and citizen, and begin the journey towards a new constitutional settlement".

The document briefly recounts how the British constitution evolved. It mentions at great length on a number of occasions the Council of Europe and the European convention on human rights. However, there is only one reference to the European Union, namely:

"in 1973, the UK joined the European Economic Community (now the European Union) and became a part of a multinational political structure."

The document does not mention the Single European Act and the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice treaties, which I think are extremely important in the evolution of our constitutional settlement. Page 19 briefly refers to the process of EU treaty ratification, but otherwise the EU is absent. For example, the document includes a list of public appointments that could be subject to affirmative hearings, but I think that European Commissioner is a classic example of an appointment that should be open to a scrutiny hearing.

The document encourages us to reinvigorate our democracy, and it mentions

"the Government's wish to ensure that decision-making is done at the right level: whether national, regional or in the local community".

It also discusses the youth citizenship commission and voting rights, but, again, there is no mention of the EU. We have a whole Green Paper on the governance of Britain that completely leaves out the source of some 60 per cent. of our domestic legislation in areas such as health and trade. When was the last time we saw Department of Trade and Industry legislation? There is no mention of the European Parliament, other than mentioning the change in voting rights, which is a sad omission in what is otherwise an exceptionally good document.

One part of the document attempts to define the values of Britain, and it considers with some envy the way in which the French or even the Americans have managed to do that. In the UK, we could make much more of the rule of law as one of the key values by which we define ourselves.

At least we can discuss that Green Paper, because we can read it. I think that the second document is called "The EU Reform Treaty". I want to make it clear that I am not against the European Union—far from it; my whole life has been a product of its evolution. However, it is sometimes disheartening how those on the Treasury Bench manage to pigeonhole anybody who has anything even marginally critical to say about it as being completely antediluvian—to want to withdraw immediately and go back to being little Englanders saying, "Fog in the Channel: continent cut off." That is not the point. I am in favour of the European Union, but I would like it to work properly. We should have the right to discuss this, and not pretend that the elephant in the room does not exist.

People say that the call for a referendum is an old Tory agenda, but I would have thought that it was a classic new Labour agenda. We are the party that has asked the people far more often than any other party has done before. The Conservatives never went to the people—they were afraid to do so. We have had local referendums and referendums on devolution. We had a referendum on whether Birmingham should have an elected mayor. I was absolutely delighted to go into the 2005 general election with a manifesto commitment that we would have a referendum on the then constitutional treaty, but it was extraordinary that the former Prime Minister did not give its constitutional implications as the reason for seeking the people's opinion.

Now we have the new treaty. In the past two and a half hours I have managed to skim through the first 26 pages of the 118-page document, which is still so far an unofficial translation. We are leaving for the recess and will not come back until October, when all the negotiations and deals will have been done, yet the purpose of this new democratic settlement, which

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

started five or six years ago, was to involve the people and national Parliaments more. I do not want to get into whether this document contains 90 or 95 per cent. of the old constitutional treaty; all I will say is that I can see, having skimmed through it, that all the big items are still in there. I do not want to fall into the trap whereby we assume that anything that has been taken out must therefore be good and anything that has been put in is bad. That is not true. People really need to read this properly. One of the things that I just spotted is on page 26, where, under the heading "Ordinary revision procedure", it says that

"any Member State, the European Parliament or the Commission"

can bring forward proposals that

"aim to increase or reduce the competencies conferred on the Union in the treaties."

That would be, for the first time, a mechanism for returning powers, which is extremely good.

The new treaty also claims to give more power to national Parliaments, but that is extremely misleading. What it does is extraordinary. For the first time, the Union tries to put a duty on national Parliaments to behave in a particular way. We do not bind our successor Parliaments, yet we are being asked to accept a document that says:

"National Parliaments shall contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union".

There is a whole list of ways in which we are supposed to fulfil that role—we will be informed, we will be seeing to things, we will be taking part, and we will be notified, but will have no teeth other than in facilitating the functioning of the Union. I am sorry, but I have never perceived having a duty to serve the Union to be my role as a national parliamentarian—I thought that it was supposed to be the other way round.

The document still contains the citizens initiative whereby more than 1 million people across a number of member states are being given the right to initiate legislation—something that national Parliaments have not done.

I suggest to the Deputy Leader of the House that the Government should stop going on about what percentage of the treaty is what it was before and look at it properly. The Government say that the red lines that we have secured mean that we do not need a referendum, but those matters were already protected in the constitutional treaty on which we were prepared to have a referendum—nothing has changed. Opt-outs are continually politically vulnerable to pressure every time a crisis occurs. This is now a question of trust. It is a question of having given a commitment to a referendum on a document that we say is good for Britain. We should ask the people to endorse that. If we are so confident that it is good, we should have the confidence to ask the people.

The Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe deny that the treaty is substantial enough for us to be bound by that promise. Are they being deliberately disingenuous or are they ill-informed? I suggest to them some light summer reading—read the treaty, in English or in French. They can then come back and we can decide which one of the two interpretations is correct.

3.15 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the summer recess, there are a number of points I wish to make. The theme of my speech is "Breakdown Britain: does anyone care who actually runs the country?" Under this dreadful Labour Government, this House has lost all its powers. We have become a glorified talking shop, and are simply ornaments. I absolutely deprecate that fact.

Last month, the occupant of No. 10 Downing street came to the Dispatch Box for Prime Minister's Question Time, at the end of which Government Members stood up to applaud his performance. They might have, but I could not believe it when Members in my party joined in the applause. The noble Baroness Thatcher left the country and the world a better place, but the last Prime Minister certainly did not.

On the day that the last Prime Minister made that appearance at the Dispatch Box, the occupant of No. 11 Downing street moved into No. 10. He was elected in 1983, and the deputy leader of the Labour party was elected in 1982. Sir John Major became Prime Minister after just 11 years—he had not been a Member of Parliament for that long, really. The leader of the Labour party and his deputy have been Members of this House for a great length of time. During the premiership of the noble Baroness Thatcher, a number of Ministers left office and a number of people resigned. Under the stewardship of the last Prime Minister, no one ever got sacked or ever resigned. Things were handled in a quite different way.

Since the former Chancellor has become Prime Minister, we have had announcements about casinos, regional government, cannabis and the supremacy of Parliament. No doubt there will be an announcement on Iraq. But, excuse me, have not the new Prime Minister and the deputy leader been at the centre of Government since 1997? How brave they were to have expressed their concerns. Did they consider resignation? No they did not, but they are now presenting themselves as a new Government. This is not a new Government, and I hope that Her Majesty's loyal Opposition will remind the public of that over and over and over again.

I have checked, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and it is in order to say that the former Prime Minister misled the House of Commons. He did, on many occasions. He misled the House of Commons on the war with Iraq—an absolute disgrace. I blame him for bringing terrorism to this country much sooner than would have otherwise been the case. We then had the sale of peerages. Was anyone surprised that there were no prosecutions? Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have checked what I can and cannot say, and did anyone expect that the Crown Prosecution Service would go ahead with the prosecutions? The gentleman who is in charge of it happens to be a Labour supporter. For goodness' sake—I say again that this is breakdown Britain. Does anyone care what is happening to our country at the moment?

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who last night drew to the House's attention all the announcements that have been made during the past two days. The Leader of the House—the boss of the Minister who will respond to

the debate—wrote an article in *The House Magazine* last week about us losing our powers and how dreadful it was. Surely the deputy leader of the Labour party is responsible for that, yet she pretends that she believes that it is dreadful and that the Government will put it all right. We have found out that the former Prime Minister's last tour, as he went around the country to sell his services, cost us nearly £2 million, and now he is a middle east peace envoy. I do not think that he will be successful there.

I want to ask the Parliamentary Secretary directly whether she can find out for me what can be done when constituents feel that the police have not behaved properly. The Independent Police Complaints Commission's powers appear to be blunt, and that also applies to police authorities' powers. I have already mentioned the Crown Prosecution Service. Where does the power lie? At some point during the Parliament, I shall speak on my personal feelings about those different organs. The Labour Government have messed them all up, including the judiciary.

I told the House a few weeks ago that, when my elderly mother was burgled for the second time, the person responsible was eventually found. That person had committed 1,379 other crimes at the age of 19, yet it is glossed over as if it is the norm. My youngest child had her mobile phone stolen a few weeks ago. Nothing will happen, although one quickly gets a letter from Victim Support. I am in despair about powers and what we can do.

I recently introduced a ten-minute Bill about online copyright theft. Creative industries are becoming one of the UK's most notable exports and need to be protected from the threat that the digital revolution poses to them. British music dominates the world. The then Minister agreed with the intention of my ten-minute Bill. I hope that whoever now has that job will support the Bill, which calls for a national enforcement agency to monitor and enforce copyright law on the internet in the way in which related industries do for themselves.

The Government have talked about a planning Bill. Planning in my constituency is a nightmare. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who introduced a private Member's Bill to tackle land grab and building on gardens. Endlessly, old houses are acquired, then left to go to rack and ruin, and the next minute there is an application to build yet another block of flats on the site. I represent a tiny urban area, where such developments have huge adverse consequences on the local population.

I recently conducted a tour of schools in my constituency. I visited an excellent infant school, which gained first-class results. However, an Ofsted inspection in February led to school morale plummeting. It caused great distress to the headmistress and the teachers. Only one person conducted the inspection. The school, with the same headmistress, had previously been described as outstanding, but that did not happen in February. After the inspection, the inspector wrote letters to infant school children. I hope that we will consider carefully the way in which Ofsted inspections are conducted in future.

Lord Archer, a former Solicitor-General, is conducting an inquiry into contaminated blood. I was privileged to give evidence on behalf of the all-party hepatology group. I hope that the Government will examine the findings of that independent inquiry because there has been a delay in producing a comprehensive strategy to tackle hepatitis C, a failure to ensure that primary care trusts implement Government strategy, a lack of NHS investment in hepatology and a failure to prioritise the issue. The sum of £2.5 million has been spent on advertising the scheme and that is simply not enough.

I end by wishing everyone a truly happy and joyous summer recess. This is breakdown Britain. I ask again: does anyone care who runs the Government? I hope that my hon. Friends do. If they want to discuss it with me further, they are very welcome to spend the summer in Southend.

3.34 pm

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the positive contribution of the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess).

I had hoped to discuss several issues on a national and an international basis, but, given that other hon. Members have cut down their contributions, I shall do likewise. I will therefore concentrate on my constituency and the work done by the few to help the many. I want specifically to refer to those with disabilities and especially a radio station called Insight.

Insight Radio was once called VIP On Air and deals with people who are blind or partially sighted. The station delivers information, has music programmes, newspaper readings and book readings that people can tune into, and generally helps people who have a sight problem. Insight Radio is a community radio station and broadcasts via a mast in the centre of my constituency at Anniesland Cross to a radius of about 5 km. The station is also on the internet and broadcasts all over the world. It receives contributions from contacts in Australia and Canada, as well as other countries in Europe. The station does an excellent job, and I see my job here as being to try to assist it.

Let me tell a story about why Insight Radio came into existence and why it wants to give information to blind people. There was a train from Glasgow to Edinburgh. The Edinburgh station at the end of line is Waverly—the other of the two main stations is the stop before, at Haymarket. ScotRail, which was in charge of the service at that time, put notices on all the seats in the train to tell everybody that the train would not stop at Waverly, but that it would stop at Haymarket. That was really good for people who could read the signs and knew that they were there, but blind passengers would have known nothing about it. Needless to say, two blind people got off at Haymarket, but thought that they were in Waverly and did not know where to go.

Insight Radio provides a service in telling people that kind of information. Unfortunately, people have to have a computer, and blind people can have problems with computers, but the facilities and the technology are advancing and we hope that they will move further. I see part of my job as being to help Insight Radio get on to Sky radio services and freeview, so that it can deliver the service to approximately 2 million in this country who have such problems. That is one of the

[John Robertson]

campaigns in which I hope to be involved when we return after the summer recess.

Another campaign that I took up some years ago was on ATMs. It was pleasing when the Select Committee on Treasury took it up and Ministers jumped onboard, too. That was great, but when I first raised the issue back in early 2005, I did so in connection with a constituent who had gone to the ATM to get some money out. He had £40 in his account. Unfortunately, the ATM charged him £1.75 to get his money out, which meant that he could get only £30 out. That meant that the rest of his money just had to sit there, and in Yoker, in my constituency, that extra £8.25 could have gone a long way. Unfortunately, if my constituent had wanted to go to a free ATM, he would have had to pay a bus fare, which would have cost him £1.50. That was totally unfair, so I took up the cause, along with many others. I worked closely with a newspaper in Glasgow called the *Evening Times*, which was helpful. The newspaper helped to broaden the campaign and the Committee took it up, too, which also helped.

I was pleased to receive a phone call last year—funnily enough, in the first week of the recess—from the Royal Bank of Scotland to say that the campaign had worked and that the bank was about to install 400 free ATMs throughout the UK. Since then, HBOS has also announced its intention to install 100 free cash machines in low-income areas in Scotland and the north of England; 74 have been installed so far, of which 38 are in Scotland. It is still looking for sites for the other 26, however, and if any hon. Members in those areas are looking for a free ATM, they should please get in touch either with me or with HBOS, which I am sure will try to install them in any deserving area. This campaign has given a lot of pleasure when things go right, and it is pleasing to know that I am now having difficulty in pinpointing sites for the other ATMs from HBOS that are not too close to other free ATMs.

The first that I know of was put into a credit union by the Royal Bank of Scotland, and I want to see the idea being taken up by other credit unions, so that people who are paying money into a credit union do not have to take it there from a bank and perhaps run the risk of being mugged or attacked on the way. The bank was very helpful. Nationwide must also be congratulated on the work that it has done. HBOS started the red and green notices on the ATMs, but Nationwide took that a step further. It did a lot of work on the red and green stickers, which show which ATMs are free to use and which involve paying a fee.

I hope that the Treasury Select Committee, the Government and hon. Members on both sides of the House will take note of this project. I believe that there is a case for taking it forward, particularly in rural areas, where people have been short-changed—no pun intended—by the banks. I do not live in a rural area, but I am quite happy to lend any assistance that hon. Members might require to contact the right people. This is certainly something that we, as Members of Parliament, should be doing to help our constituents.

I want to mention the communications allowance that has been given to Members of Parliament. I know that some Opposition Members did not think that it was a great idea, but let me tell them, it will allow me to contact every one of my constituents. I am going to do that this summer by putting out a questionnaire to ask them what they want and what they think are the most important issues. I, as their Member of Parliament, can then address the matters that they think are important. I can then go back to them and they will be able to tell me whether I have done my job or not. Come the next general election, whenever it might be, they will have the opportunity either to vote for me or to replace me, but at least I will not have had to say that I did not have the opportunity to contact them and to let them know what I was doing, or that they could not contact me to tell me about their issues.

I want to talk about the draft legislative programme and the Queen's Speech. I have tried twice already—and I shall keep trying until I succeed—to introduce a Bill on employment retention and rehabilitation leave. People who become disabled or whose disability gets worse while they are in employment and who want to remain in employment should be given the opportunity to do so while being supported not only by the company but by the Government. They should be enabled to get back into work where they can pay their taxes, which will give money to the Treasury, and give valuable work to their employer, to whom they might feel that they owe something for having looked after them. I hope that hon. Members will support that measure when it comes back.

I want briefly to mention yesterday's announcement about the ships to be built in Scotstoun in my constituency, which has secured the employment of 2,000 workers. I also want to reiterate my point to the Secretary of State that I am still looking for the seventh and eighth Type 45 destroyers, and I certainly want to take part in the debate on defence procurement on the second day after we come back from the recess, to talk about what we are going to do with the MARS—military afloat research and sustainability—ships and to ensure that shipbuilding in the United Kingdom is up and running and will continue for quite a few years to come.

3.34 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) (LD): I endorse the final comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson). Like him, I would welcome an announcement on the seven and eight Type 45 destroyers. Both of our constituencies would benefit enormously from the shipbuilding capacity alone.

Let me deal with yesterday's welcome announcement not only of the two aircraft carriers, but of the retention of the three naval base solution. It is the only option that does real credit to the Royal Navy and great service to the country. From Portsmouth's point of view, I was particularly pleased at the Minister's statement about what would happen in the future and about the need for the three communities—in Scotland, the west country and south Hampshire—to work together to find a system from which we can all benefit while the Royal Navy maintains its ships and looks after those craft. Further opportunities will undoubtedly come through the shipbuilding programme.

I would like to thank the team from Portsmouth for its magnificent efforts. There are far too many people

to be thanked individually, but I would mention the local authority and Portsmouth city council's lead officer, Barbara Thompson and her team; the team from the South East England Development Agency; and the Royal Navy base commander, David Steel, who did a magnificent job. He made a determined effort to stress to his senior officer colleagues the importance of Portsmouth in the overall concept of the Navy. That message was put out to the local media, including radio, television and the *Portsmouth News*, which led a great campaign to save the base. All those people really need to be congratulated. I hope that we can now all work together to make the building of the aircraft carriers successful while retaining the three bases. That really means something for our nation.

My next topic also relates to defence. Several Members have raised the matter of the reformed constitutional treaty, particularly aspects connected with defence. There are worrying consequences arising from it. The proposals on defence are extremely alarming because they give no indication of how European defence will be properly scrutinised in future. It is rightly suggested that national parliaments should have a major role, but the unified Europe approach to scrutiny is not at all clear. One suspects that most of the decisions will be taken in Lisbon towards the end of September—it could turn out to be a black day, because we will not have had an opportunity to debate them before they are signed up to. I regret that. I am with other Members who believe that we should have an opportunity to debate first what our position should be at Lisbon in September, but more importantly, whether or not we are going to trust the British people to take the decision. I, for one, wholeheartedly support the idea of having a referendum. I did at the outset of the process and I retain that view today.

Together with Labour and Conservative colleagues, I have already had a meeting with the Minister for Europe on the issue of how to deal with defence scrutiny through an amendment to existing treaties that would allow the current structure of the Western European Union to be broadened out to include all member states of the EU. In our case the delegation comprises 36 members—18 full and 18 substitute members. I believe that delegations should be responsible for national scrutiny—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) shakes his head, but had he been a member, it might be different. The current chair of the parliamentary Labour party is an enthusiastic member. The former Deputy Prime Minister is about to lead the British delegation to the Council of Europe—*[Interruption.]* That is a very interesting point. Perhaps we will know where he stands in the future. Undoubtedly, those Members are big supporters of that platform, as am I. I would hope that we could sensibly look to that as an alternative that would not require a major treaty to be put in place. Anything else will need a new treaty, as it will not be compatible with the treaties of Rome, Maastricht or Amsterdam. I urge Ministers to look carefully at what I have outlined as a viable alternative option.

My next point relates to the ongoing problem faced by women who marry UK citizens from abroad. They sometimes come to this country on a spousal, fiancée or visitor visa, believing that once they are married—this is what their partner has told them—they will automatically become British citizens. They get married and have children here. However, if for one reason or another the marriage breaks down, they can find that the partner who promised to "do everything" has done nothing. They may suddenly be confronted with a difficult situation. Two of my constituents—one a lady from Russia, the other from the Gambia,, both with children—are in that position at the moment. They have been told that they now have to leave the UK, but that they can leave their children behind—not with their husbands, but in the care of the state. They cannot take the children with them because they are British citizens and their British fathers are refusing permission for the children to be taken out of the country. Those ladies cannot have legal aid for legal support to fight appeals. They came here with a status that did not allow them to claim benefits, and they have been totally abandoned by society and their partners. The Government must recognise that there is a real issue. I must have had at least a dozen similar cases in my constituency—the two that I have quoted are the ones with which I am currently dealing.

I went to the immigration court of appeal with one of those constituents, only to be told by the judge that, as a Member of Parliament, I had no right to be there. The judge all but ordered me from the court. My constituent, a Russian citizen, had no legal representation and no one to present her case or speak up for her. Of course, her case failed, because she had been seen not to have done the things that we demanded of her. Her husband will be in court in the near future on a case of domestic violence against the woman, but she had no help whatever from anyone—no lawyer or immigration adviser would touch her.

It was news to me that Members of Parliament were prohibited from representing our constituents in immigration courts, and it must have been news as well to part of the immigration service, because when it asked whom the lady's representative was and I was identified—and I wrote to the court to ask for the date to be changed so that I could attend in the afternoon, not the morning—it readily agreed. It was only the judge who suddenly presented us with the fact that Members of Parliament are particularly excluded from representing constituents in such immigration cases, which is an absolute nonsense.

We must do something about the rights of such women. It is simply ridiculous to say to them that they cannot stay in a women's refuge for more than three weeks because no local authority will fund them, but that they can have their children taken into care, and they can go on the street, or they can go home and leave their children here at a cost of probably £1,000 a month. I urge the Government quickly to consider the case of ladies who, in one way or another, have been misled by their British citizen husbands who bring them into the country and then all but abandon them. Those men should be made to support them.

My final point is on housing, which many Members have said is important, and it certainly is in my constituency. I cannot wait for us to have the courage again to say that we are proud to build council houses, to call them council houses, and to say that they should be available to people who would not get on to the housing ladder

[Mr. Mike Hancock]

otherwise. Portsmouth has more people waiting to be re-housed now than it did just after the second world war, when nearly 50 per cent. of all properties in the city were either damaged or completely destroyed by the effects of the blitz. The current situation will not easily be remedied. If the Prime Minister is as good as his word and genuinely wants housing back on the agenda—housing that local authorities can control and build according to need, rather than according to a developer's requirement—we might be in for a surprise, and many more people might live in houses that are fit for them to live in.

3.43 pm

Ms Celia Barlow (Hove) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) and his comments about immigration and asylum and housing. Bearing in mind that many Members wish to speak, however, I will not follow that track.

I am privileged to represent a constituency with a strong community spirit. The demographic make-up of Hove and Portslade has evolved over the years, and now encompasses people from all backgrounds and nationalities. The area has mosques, temples and churches all within yards of each other. Throughout the recent national and international tensions, the people of Hove and Portslade have been proud to recognise that our community is stronger when we work together. As the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South mentioned, in our globalised society, many choose to marry partners from different countries and cultures. In those circumstances, where a couple have made a genuine commitment to each other, the bureaucracy and at times frustrating approach by the foreign countries and our own immigration service can place a great strain on individuals, their families and friends.

I would like to mention my constituent, Abdullah Al-Shimmeri. Mr. Al-Shimmeri is a Bidoon from Kuwait. The state of Kuwait does not recognise such people as their citizens. In an article in April last year, the *Gulf States Newsletter* stated that Bidoons in Kuwait have been given more rights but that Kuwaiti citizenship was still far off. Last October, the United Arab Emirates announced plans to naturalise around 10,000 Bidoons—people who have been living without citizenship for more than three decades in their country. However, that has not happened in Kuwait. Therefore, Kuwait will not allow Mr. Al-Shimmeri to return, and as such the Home Office has been unable to arrange a travel document for him. That situation is particularly difficult in light of the fact that he is married to a British citizen. They have a small child together. I have taken over that case from my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt). Mr. Al-Shimmeri first came into my surgery two years ago, and the matter is still dragging on. Throughout that time, his family has had no security and he has been unable to support his young child.

Mr. Al-Shimmeri is liable for removal to Kuwait. The Home Office has attempted to remove him on one occasion. However, it was unable to: as he had nowhere to go to, he does not possess travel documents. As a result, Mr. Al-Shimmeri was detained for a number of months by the Home Office at taxpayers' expense. Ideally, if he were able to return to Kuwait and apply for entry into the United Kingdom in the correct manner, he would be entitled to remain here. Indeed, he would like to do exactly that, but like Tom Hanks in "The Terminal", which was based on a true story, he is trapped, stateless and unable fully to participate in either his country of origin or the country in which he lives and where his wife and child are British citizens.

I have written to the Kuwaiti embassy, requesting travel documents for Mr. Al-Shimmeri, but that was refused on the grounds that he is not a Kuwaiti citizen. I have also written to the Minister for Borders and Immigration, trying to find a solution to this seemingly intractable problem. The Home Office felt unable to provide a short-term solution on a discretionary basis, as it was argued that there are additional avenues which could be taken to verify Mr. Al-Shimmeri's status as a Bidoon. However, I would like to know what those are, since the Kuwaiti embassy still refuses to discuss that issue.

After two years, Mr. Al-Shimmeri and his family are still trapped in this Catch-22 situation: he is due to be removed from the country and would indeed like to be removed, were he able to return to Kuwait in order legitimately to re-enter the UK. It seems morally wrong to me that somebody who is clearly part of a loving family, who has contributed to his local community and who is longing to work and support his family financially should have to put his life at a halt for more than two years—indeed, for the foreseeable future—due to nothing more than a procedural point.

I appreciate that this is not at all a Home Office failure, but a decision taken by the state of Kuwait. However, may I ask my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House, whom I welcome to her first debate on the motion for the Adjournment of the House, to ask the Home Office to take a pragmatic approach in this matter, making sure that Mr. Al-Shimmeri can legally settle and work in the UK, where his family are. I also ask her to ask the Foreign Office to impress upon Kuwait that its policy on Bidoons is creating misery for many people such as Abdullah Al-Shimmeri. The UAE's decision to naturalise Bidoons living in that country is a good example of how to address that problem. It is couples such as Mr. and Mrs. Al-Shimmeri who often contribute so much, and we should be grateful for the contribution that they make to the fabric of our society. We should apply common sense where it is needed; indeed, it is essential in this case.

Our communities are strengthened not only by individuals, but by so many of our local institutions. From banks sponsoring the painting of our schools to our local football team providing a platform for education for those who might otherwise feel disconnected from learning and skills, we owe a debt of gratitude to so many. That is why I am particularly delighted that after much deliberation and consultation the prospect of a wonderful new community stadium for Brighton and Hove Albion is finally on the horizon. I use the phrase "community stadium" as it best describes the immense benefits that the new development will have for all who live in the immediate

area. The new stadium will have positive effects that will extend far beyond providing a permanent home for our city's football team.

Brighton and Hove Albion has always prided itself on its community work. Ever since it was founded in 1901 it has been at the heart of community projects, contributing on a practical level in both sports and general education. Building on its already established adult education programmes, the Albion's "Playing for Success" programme makes a real and measurable difference to educational opportunities for hundreds of children in Brighton and Hove. Run by a centre manager and supported by other teachers and tutor mentors, it focuses on raising standards of literacy, numeracy and ICT among key stage 2 and 3 pupils and adults in my community.

The Albion understands the impact and influence that football has on the lives of so many in the community of Brighton and Hove—a community that has supported the club through good times and bad. By working with the Government, the local authority, local and national businesses and the many schools in the area, the club is able to provide an educational programme throughout the area. As the community of Brighton and Hove has sustained the club through good times and, unfortunately in the past decade, through bad, so the club aims to sustain the community.

On behalf of so many of my constituents and supporters of the Albion across Sussex, Britain and even the world, I wish to thank the Government and in particular my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government—and I ask my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House to do the same—for taking that decision. Based in an area of the city that houses some of our poorer constituents, Falmer stadium will be a wonderful community facility and it will provide a real and measurable difference for generations to come.

As we look to regenerate our most deprived areas, it is essential that we continue to realise and to acknowledge the true value of community. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) for the free ATM machines throughout my constituency, and I hope that there will soon be more of them. The former home of the Albion, the Goldstone ground, has an ATM machine and that resource was used by many in the local community. I hope that the new ground will also have that facility and I urge the Deputy Leader of the House to ask those few remaining opponents of the ground to accept the Secretary of State's decision. After 10 years, the community deserves the new stadium. The Government have taken several important steps to ensure that we as individuals recognise that our spirit of community is something that we should cherish, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her decision.

I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and all other hon. Members a very happy summer recess.

3.53 pm

Mr. Dai Davies (Blaenau Gwent) (Ind): I have three issues to raise and I hope that other hon. Members will recognise them, because after devolution it is often difficult to tell where one part of the UK starts and another ends.

The first is the 90-day consultation period that was introduced by the Maastricht treaty. In the opinion of many, it does not help the businesses concerned. At the moment we are in a consultation period for Remploy, which started after the decision to close a significant number of factories had been announced. That is negotiation after the event, and there is a huge difference between consultation and negotiation. Workers have to negotiate on the back foot, and that is the wrong way to do it. I urge the Government to consider early-day motion 1689 on UK manufacturing, which has cross-party support and calls for a level playing field in consultation. It calls for workers to be involved before decisions are made by boards of directors, because otherwise one is starting from a losing position. I have been involved directly and indirectly in situations where workers are asked for their opinion after a closure announcement has been made. It is almost impossible to change that decision. I hope that in the Remploy case there will be some change, but we await events.

Another important thing that is happening throughout the country, and in my constituency as we speak, is the buy-out of businesses by multinationals in order to asset-strip. They buy the smaller units in places such as my constituency and announce closure, and then there is a 90-day consultation—not on how to save the factory but on how to close it. Again, the decision is made without consulting the work force. The multinationals have the power to decide the fate of those small factories, and the workers are left to worry about their future. I urge the Government to look at that EDM and to enforce the Warwick agreement, which says that we should consult and work with employees before decisions are made.

The second issue that I want to raise concerns policing and community safety. I welcome today's announcement about the work to be carried out with the youths of our country. Preventive is obviously better than reactive and that is a huge step forward. I support the creation of police community support officers and the antisocial behaviour structure, but I would ask the Government to look at an issue that has been brought to the attention of the House many times: the need for a police presence on the streets. We have seen reports recently that as much as 73 per cent. of police time is spent on bureaucracy—behind a desk, not out on the street. I have spoken to local inspectors and chief inspectors recently, and they agree that too much time is spent behind a desk. To drive through an area of a constituency is not to police the area. Travelling through streets at 40 or 50 mph to get back to the station to fill out a report is not policing the area. We need to ensure that the police presence is where it is most needed: out on the streets.

There are some allied areas that we really need to work on to support the police and our communities. The importance of youth workers was mentioned in today's statement. We cannot expect people to take on those roles with a contract of one, three or five months. It must be a job of work. Yes, it is a vocation, but they need security of employment. If we start a project, let us ensure that it has a long time to run, because we need those people.

The other significant problem in my constituency, and I guess many others, is a huge lack of social

[Mr. Dai Davies]

workers. In recent years, we have had social workers from Canada, Romania and Poland coming into our boroughs to work with families, but—and I mean no disrespect to their training or the way that they gained their skills—as they are without community knowledge and the link to that community, it is very difficult for them to have a real impact on helping, sustaining and supporting the families. In my opinion, that knowledge is priceless. It is essential to know the people whom one is dealing with.

Teachers have an important part to play. We have spoken many times about children with learning difficulties. Dyslexia or learning problems that are not identified at an early age can lead to the disfranchisement of children. Primary heads have told me that we need to start at primary school level; it is too late when pupils reach secondary school. We have all heard of cases where children reach the age of 11 and then just disappear into the ether. We need to start at primary school level and really deal with young children, getting families involved but ensuring that they are part of the community.

It is important to have a consultation process with young people. When I was 13—a long, long time ago—one was still a child at 13 or 14. Now they are young adults. The whole attitude of the youth culture is completely different. In order to get them at primary school level, with the parents, to talk about the problems of drugs and alcohol and so many other things, we need to deliver at a very early age. We need to ensure that the whole support mechanism—social work, youth work and the police—works together for the benefit of all the community.

The third and last issue that I want to raise is apprenticeship training. A report on the importance of apprenticeship training came out from the other place in the past couple of days. As an apprentice a long time ago, I know that working alongside other skilled people is so important. I have asked questions over the past couple of months about the structure of the apprentice system and I know that the numbers have increased significantly. I think that there are 250,000 apprenticeships now, but where do they lead? Are they work-based? Are they in the crafts and skills that we need in our communities? My community is looking at the regeneration of a former steelworks site, and we need bricklayers, carpenters, electricians and plumbers, but I know that if I went to the jobcentre tomorrow and asked for five electricians, they would not be there. We train in retail and lots of things, but targeted training is what we need.

We talk about where we learn the skills, and in comprehensive education there was a structure by which someone could take woodwork, metalwork, catering and engineering. However, we have moved away from that to ICT. I was not sure what it meant until I asked my son—information communication technology, but what does that mean? I am not sure. I know what woodwork and metalwork are; I can guess about that. We need to get back to basics in that respect and comprehensive education offered that and can still offer it. We need to look at how we train at an early age to encourage young people to go into properly structured apprenticeships. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of work-based training. Experience at the face is important, and I stress that again and again.

Having said those three things, I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and every right hon. and hon. Member a peaceful and, let us hope, successful recess. See you in October.

4.2 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): I agree with comments of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Davies) about proper workplace apprenticeships for the most basic skills that we need in our engineering industry. Those skills are lacking at the moment.

I will gallop through my speech to give other hon. Members time to contribute. I will raise my concerns about the conduct of the local election that took place in my constituency on 3 May. I do not think that I can do any better than to start by quoting early-day motion 1435 in my name. It says:

"That this House congratulates the individuals and organisations, secular and religious, who have over many years worked assiduously towards community cohesion and integration in Keighley; but condemns in the strongest terms the behaviour of certain Keighley Conservatives who, under the direction of their candidate Zafar Ali, used the tactics of intimidation, treating and discriminatory propaganda to secure electoral victory in Keighley Central ward on 3rd May 2007; further condemns the failure of officers of Bradford Metropolitan District Council to take action against such activities; expresses the hope that no authority in future will allow such activity to take place; and urges the Government to review electoral law as it applies in these circumstances with a view to tightening up regulations and providing for sanctions in future."

A number of factors on that day caused considerable concern to me and others. Although an understanding of electoral law is not the most exciting of subjects, unless our council officers, presiding officers or the police are trained in electoral law, how can we ever hope to protect our democracy? The assistant returning officer in Bradford argued that treating was not an offence and stated that, as long as the cost of the food and drink that is offered to voters on election day is included in the election returns, it is not illegal. That is absurd.

Worryingly, the confusion goes beyond the returning officer. In dealing with allegations of treating, West Yorkshire police, in a recent e-mail to my office, took the view that reference should be made to

"the Election commission document 'Guidance on fraud prevention and detection for use at May 2007 elections in England and Wales'."

The e-mail continued:

"a protocol between ACPO and the commission describes the role of both organisations in such an instance. The Police should not independently investigate matters pertaining to expenses. This is the commission's responsibility. If they consider there are grounds for further investigation the enquiry is passed to the relevant Police force."

However, in dealing with the same allegation, the Electoral Commission states its position as follows:

"Looking into allegations of 'treating' is a matter which falls beyond the remit of the Commission."

The sad reality is that, when the returning officer, the police and the Electoral Commission all take the view that they are not responsible, nothing is done—and nor will it be. Treating is a crime and if the perpetrators are

allowed to get away with it, I am afraid that the practice will continue and possibly be accepted as the norm, eventually becoming decriminalised.

Similarly, confusion regarding responsibility between the police and the electoral services in Bradford was highlighted by the issue of the use of discriminatory language. Over the public address system—used only in areas inhabited predominantly by the Asian community—those acting for the Conservative candidate, Zafar Ali, called for people to "vote for their Muslim brother". My constituents were told that that was their religious duty. When that was reported to both the electoral services and the police, they each said that it was a matter for the other. Again, the result was that nothing was done.

Intimidating crowds stood outside polling stations discouraging people from entering to vote. Again, contemporaneous complaints to both the police and the electoral services resulted in each insisting that responsibility rested with the other. Again, the net result was that intimidation was allowed to continue unchallenged.

Much worse is the fact that, recently, people with no party affiliation whatsoever came to my office to tell me that they had been visited by Zafar Ali and told by him not to mention to the police the fact that he did indeed ask them to "vote for their Muslim brother." I have had to guarantee their anonymity because they fear violent repercussions for them and their family should their identity be known. Clearly, the breaking of ranks is feared more than the weight of the law.

I was also recently visited by a member of the clergy in my constituency who told me that the Conservative parliamentary candidate in Keighley was concerned by the fact that he was having to work with "unsavoury characters in the Asian community." Indeed, for once, I agree with him. Of the main supporters of the Conservative candidate in Keighley Central in May, one has been investigated for money laundering and another declared bankrupt on at least two occasions. They are the small minority, but they are running the show.

To add to this shady political cocktail, there was a recent announcement by the local organiser of the British National party in support of the Conservative candidate at the next general election. The announcement said that the BNP would not field a candidate. This coalition of the extremists may appear to be a strange alliance, and it certainly is. The relationship between extremists—they need to feed off each other in order to survive—is not new. However, it is the first time that we have seen it in Keighley and the first time that it has, through electoral manipulation, threatened our electoral system.

I do not fear elections; I thrive on them. Nor do I fear losing. I am prepared to accept the views of the electorate when they are allowed to express them freely and within the law. However, I am not prepared passively to stand by and allow extremists, from wherever they hail, to take advantage of our elections and get away with clear infringements of the law. I do not believe that the type of incidents witnessed in Keighley on 3 May are confined to Keighley. Similar allegations have arisen across the country. However, the situation can never be challenged when our authorities are untrained and unprepared on questions of electoral law and, more importantly, unwilling to act.

As a society, are we prepared to accept the blurring of the lines and allow inappropriate practices to become the norm? Are we prepared passively to allow a misguided minority, hell-bent on victory whatever the cost, to rule? At the heart of British society is a sense of decency, tolerance and compromise. The fairness of our legal system inspires confidence, here and abroad. It is naive to believe that everyone will simply act according to the spirit of the laws, and there can be nothing more naive than to think that turning a blind eye or passing the buck will solve the problem.

Postal voting can be—and is, for most people—a real asset, but there have been irregularities. The answer in the Bradford district, which includes my constituency, was for candidates and agents to sign up to a voluntary code of conduct, based on an assumption of decency and honesty. It never seemed to cross the mind of the police and officials that it might be ignored, and neither group made any preparation to deal with the law-breakers. We must accommodate the desire for easy access to the polls, but we must balance that with the real threat of prosecution when there is any infringement of the law. Realistically, we can only hope to reach that stage when there is a coherent and clear line of responsibility, supported by the will to act. I have not finished my speech, but given your request, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will bring my remarks to a close.

4.11 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer), who is absolutely right. The chairman of the Electoral Commission, Sam Younger, is working closely with the Government to toughen the way in which electoral returning officers do their job, and to put regional super-returning officers into the system above them, so that returning officers do not have the final word in matters of law. In my constituency, as in Keighley, corrupt and incompetent decisions have been taken by returning officers.

Mr. Jenkin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bob Spink: No, I do not think that I can, because of the time. I apologise for my voice; I lost it at a party in my garden last Saturday, which greatly pleased 400 of my constituents. We raised £4,000 clear profit for charity. My constituency faces a number of threats, not least those posed by over-development and designs on our green belt. An aggravating factor is that we get more and more houses but no new supporting infrastructure and no real extra capacity, such as doctors, schools or dentists. Our local roads suck. The ever increasing congestion hits us all, and the lack of proper, reliable access for Canvey is a growing problem for many reasons. Not least among them is the public safety issue of the possibility of having to evacuate the island because of global warming and rising sea levels, which I am watching carefully. In fact, just yesterday I had a meeting with the Environment Agency about improving Canvey's flood defences.

The loss of more Castle Point post offices, on top of those that have already had to close, is an avoidable tragedy, but it will happen. Hon. Members will find

[Bob Spink]

that an average of three or four additional post offices will close in every constituency in the country. Those post offices will be put to the sword because of the European Union. Article 88 of the 1997 EU treaty of Amsterdam obliges Parliament to seek the permission of Brussels if we want to subsidise our own post offices. After lengthy negotiations, we were finally permitted to subsidise them with a measly £50 million a year for three years. Another 2,500 to 3,000 post offices will be closed, hurting the fabric of our communities and vulnerable individuals. That is one reason why I became the chairman of the Campaign for an Independent Britain—to fight for British interests. More of that later.

Let me address one final local issue: Calor wants to store liquefied natural gas on Canvey Island. It would be imported to Canvey, via a boom arm on a jetty, from ships on the Thames. More than 100,000 tonnes of LNG will be held in two huge new tanks, each of them over 130 ft high. This would bring significant risk to the mainland, as well as to Canvey people.

I asked Parliament for a public inquiry, and I asked for it to be held on Canvey island. Although there was a bit of shuffling, both those requests were met. The inquiry starts on 30 October and I will, as always, represent everyone on Canvey, irrespective of their politics. I will work tirelessly for the public interest. I have already submitted to the inspector more than 100 individual letters of objection. At the inquiry I will use the important 9,000 signature petition compiled by the Canvey Island Independent party, and I will use the People Against Methane referendum.

My constant questioning of Ministers in Parliament has revealed evidence that may greatly assist our cause. I will present all that evidence at the inquiry. I wanted to present it now, but there is no time. I will do all I can to stop the Canvey LNG plans, because the human and environmental consequences are not just unacceptable; they are unthinkable.

I turn to a couple of national issues. Children's palliative care is dear to my heart, and I am sorry to say that those services are facing cuts and closures. They include children's hospices, the Diana community nursing teams, home nursing teams and a raft of other voluntary and statutory agencies. As a result, children and their families who need help—families with terminally ill children—are still not getting that help. I asked for and helped to get £27 million stop-gap funding, for which I thank the Government, and a long-term review. I had intended to elaborate, but I shall cut that part of my speech as well.

I welcome the Prime Minister's new support for changing the way honours are awarded. It is about time. People such as hard-working volunteers, doctors, nurses and teachers deserve honours. They are the real stars who make our country special and great. Those such as Joyce Long, Joan Lythgoe, Eddie Stacy and John Brennan in my constituency who, like many others, have worked selflessly for years deserve recognition. The public are sickened by awards to celebrities, who already have obscene amounts of money and adulation for doing relatively little and often setting bad examples. We must do more to reward and encourage those who do wonderful selfless work in our communities, and not insult them by giving gratuitous awards to celebs. Hug a luvvy is off the agenda.

Inevitably, I come to Europe. Seven in 10 British people want looser ties with the European Union. They want a transparent, mature and constructive relationship, but they want Britain to be put first. They want a free Britain. Enter the Campaign for an Independent Britain, the CIB. It is the UK's oldest significant Eurosceptic organisation—indeed, it invented the word Eurosceptic. It provides co-ordination and unity for the broadly Eurosceptic national organisations that represent the opinion of 70 per cent. of the British public.

The CIB has members from across the political spectrum, as the umbrella organisation serving many excellent groups such as the Campaign Against Euro Federalism, the UK Independence party, the Freedom Association, the Bruges group and many others. It is those groups, not MPs, who are truly defending Britain, trying to regain the primacy of Parliament, and trying to stop the uncontrolled EU immigration that damages race relations and is adding to our housing crisis, with up to half a million immigrants a year entering the UK from Europe. It is those Eurosceptic groups that are trying to stop the haemorrhaging of our money and jobs to Europe.

Finally, I turn to the treaty and say plainly that it is a constitution. Only 10 of the 250 proposals are different, so 96 per cent. of the text is unchanged. The articles have simply been renumbered. German Chancellor Merkel said:

"The substance of the constitution is preserved."

The Irish Prime Minister says that 90 per cent. of the constitution remains in the treaty. Giscard d'Estaing says that the figure is over 90 per cent. The former Belgian Prime Minister says that it is 95 per cent. The Spanish Foreign Minister says that it is 98 per cent. This sounds like one of my charity auctions. The man who actually wrote the constitution, and who knows about it said:

"There have been few changes."

The Government's own Trade Minister said that it

"is a con to call this a treaty; it's not. It's exactly the same: it's a constitution."

The Prime Minister has said that he wants to restore trust in the Government and to listen to and involve people in decisions affecting their lives, but he has betrayed them by breaking his promise on a referendum. He is trying to commit one of the most audacious political deceptions ever attempted, but the big battle lies elsewhere. Around 70 per cent. of UK laws now originate from the EU, and as the shadow Leader of the House put it last week:

"Parliament is ignored and its decisions are overridden".

The fundamental problem lies in section 2(1) of the European Communities Act 1972, which is where the eventual solution must also lie. The provision dictates that

"All such rights, powers, liabilities, obligations and restrictions...created or arising by or under the Treaties...are without further enactment to be given legal effect...in the United Kingdom...and be enforced".

No hon. Member or Government should bind a future Parliament or hand over our parliamentary democracy

to an unelected foreign body, but that is what the 1972 Act effectively does—it must be changed, which is my long-term aim.

Shame on the Prime Minister for his dishonesty in breaking his promise. I say to my own party that our Conservative principles made Britain great, and we should trust those principles, especially on defending our Parliament.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. If I heard the hon. Gentleman correctly, I think that he accused the Prime Minister of being "dishonest". I do not think that that is an appropriate word. Perhaps he will withdraw or modify it.

Bob Spink: I am happy to withdraw that word, and I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Bring on the election, so that decent, honest British people can dump this sleazy Government, who hold so cheaply the traditions and constitutional rights that British people have won over the centuries with their blood, sweat and tears.

4.21 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) (Lab): As is traditional on these occasions among most hon. Members, I intend to focus on local issues.

Disabled facilities grants are made available by local authorities to assist elderly people with disabilities to stay in their homes, and they are increasingly used to help younger people who require assistance, too. We all recognise the increased demand for adaptations. People are living longer, and a greater degree of choice is available. Most people choose to stay in their own homes rather than moving into a nursing environment. There is also an increasing technical capability to assist people and to help older people and the disabled to stay at home.

Local factors in South Derbyshire have further increased the growth of adaptations. First, the local district council, I think correctly, decided to resource its own design team to provide adaptations. The county council service had previously been subject to delays, and the district council's decision has provided more rapid progress through the design stage. Secondly, there is a strong local commitment to care in someone's own home by the county council, which is welcome and which is a view that I share. Thirdly, there is the terrible physical legacy of the mining industry in South Derbyshire, which has left many people, some of whom are quite young, in need of help with adaptations in their homes. Fourthly, there is a fast-growing population—it is the fastest growing in the east midlands. Fifthly, rurality is an issue. The district is largely rural, which means that when adaptations are made, they need to be inclusive—a person may need to be more self-sufficient, because it is not always possible to supplement their needs.

Government resources for the grant have doubled in the past 10 years, which is welcome. Local authorities must increase the sum provided by the Government to attempt to meet demand. Over the past two years, South Derbyshire district council has committed more than £500,000 towards the scheme—it has actually contributed the majority of the funds.

The Government have been consulting on changes in the grants system, because they recognise the trends that I initially identified and the need for strategic alterations in how the money is delivered. Many of the proposed changes are welcome but may challenge the budget still further—for example, raising the maximum limit of the cost of works that will be funded out of the grant. Making some very welcome changes will, again, stretch resources—for example, removing the means test on adaptations where disabled children are involved. In South Derbyshire, that has led—I do not criticise this at all—to applications from families who had previously had difficulty in getting support because of the means test. Under the new rules, some extremely costly schemes are coming forward that recognise the severe needs that those families have. There has been some sensible piloting of ways in which the budget that is available can be used more flexibly with greater co-working between agencies. A lot of useful work is going on.

Local authorities may only claim 60 per cent. of their expenditure on these grants, but would that South Derbyshire actually received that sort of sum. In fact, over the past two years it has itself contributed the majority of the costs of the scheme. As a small district council, that places its budget under steadily increasing pressure. The Government regional office attempts to arbitrate between the various bids for resources under the scheme and uses a mechanism that appears to be based largely on the number of disability living allowance and attendance allowance claimants in the area, together with a comparison with the bid from the local authority.

There are inevitably, and have been for some time, shortfalls in the council's ability to respond to the bids that it receives. Many councils, I am afraid, address that by, for example, slowing down the process by cutting back the design stage so that it takes longer to arrive at a scheme that can be delivered, or failing to promote the scheme so that people do not know that it is available. There are several ways of making the scheme costs smaller in the short term, although I am glad to say that they have not been followed by my council. However, the consequence is that it starts this financial year with £483,000-worth of commitments beyond the resources that it has available for the scheme. It has historically paid in additional resources from other parts of its capital budget to supplement the scheme; I emphasise that this is a statutory obligation, with no choice involved. The council must meet the demands that are placed on it. The only flexibility it has is to delay the process and increase the backlog. It is expected that at the end of this financial year the scale of unmet demand will probably reach £750,000.

What is desperately needed is first, in the short term, a discussion between the regional office and the council about the resources that it needs on a more realistic basis; and secondly, more globally, that the comprehensive spending review allocates sufficient resources to this very important budget head within the Department for Communities and Local Government—one that helps the most needy people in many of our communities.

I want to spend a moment or two on another matter which I am surprised that other Members have not raised. I have had increasing numbers of complaints from my constituents who are British Gas consumers

[Mr. Mark Todd]

about inaccuracies and difficulties in their bills. I have been greatly helped by Energywatch in pursuing issues with the company to resolve disputes that have in some cases even led to threats of court action and other consequences. That has led me to reflect on the changes that the Government have already set out for dealing with consumer representation in this area and has highlighted further work that we need to do. The removal of an organisation such as Energywatch, which we intend, cannot be left as a matter for the marketplace. The assumption is that we now have a free market in which informed consumers can make their own judgments and in which, if dissatisfied by either the quality of customer service or supply, they simply shift. I do not think that my constituents are unusual; a small number of people have that flexibility and are willing to play the game, but many wish to rely on one company and expect to receive a competent, adequate service and to be billed correctly.

If the advocacy currently available is removed, people will need additional support by other means. One of those means will be to turn to the offices of people such as me for assistance, which, of course, I will be happy to provide. Others will go to the citizens advice bureau and seek help there. What is at least required is the application of clear complaint handling standards to the energy companies; a comprehensive collection of complaint data, so that it is understood how the companies are performing; clear advice on where a consumer can get help, not simply saying to them, "You have got to talk further to the energy company;" and an independent audit of that complaint procedure to see whether standards are being maintained. To leave many consumers—those who contact me tend to be older—to the hands of the free market in the hope that customer service standards will rise in a competitive environment is simply unreasonable.

I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and others, a very happy recess. I suspect that it will be a hard-working one.

4.31 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): Like the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), I shall concentrate primarily on a local issue, but never having taken part in one of these end-of-term debates before, it is a great pleasure to hear such a variety of topics raised under a rather arcane procedure. As I understand it, every speaker so far has pledged to vote against the Adjournment, and as the whole of the House is on a one-line Whip, the Government might lose the vote. I wait with bated breath to see how this works.

I would like to pick out two issues raised so far. First, it is remarkable that there is such cross-party concern about the so-called reform treaty of the European Union. The referendum campaign is gathering pace; it goes far beyond those who might be described as the usual suspects. I particularly welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who pointed out that the Government seem to brand as some sort of extremist anyone who raises any objection about any of the treaties, when in fact, the points that she raised, and those raised by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), were reasonable.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) declared himself in favour of a referendum, which demonstrates that one does not need to be a Eurosceptic to be in favour of one. It is incumbent on the Deputy Leader of the House to explain not why the treaty is a marginally different arrangement—that the constitution has been dropped and replaced by an amending treaty—but the substantial difference between the effect of the constitutional treaty and what is now proposed. If she can explain that, she might begin to explain why it was right to have a referendum on the constitutional treaty and why it is wrong to have one on this new arrangement. I suspect that she cannot begin to explain that because the effect of the reformed treaty is almost identical, if not actually identical, to the previous one. It is dishonest to pretend that there should not be a referendum, and that there is not as strong a case for a referendum as there was before, as conceded by the Prime Minister.

The other point I wish to pick up on relates to the comments of the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) about the problems of returning officers and the management of modernised election processes. Our returning officers have been grossly overloaded with far too much change. They are overburdened, especially by the postal voting problem. I have received a letter from the returning officer in each of my districts expressing deep concern. Both complain that there is insufficient print capacity to handle the postal voting in a general election. People complained about late postal votes at the local elections, when half the numbers who vote in general elections turn out. When we have a general election or a referendum, the system will be grossly overstretched, especially with the additional requirement for personal verification of every vote and matching the signatures on the electoral register with those that come in with the postal votes. It is far too big a logistical problem and there are not enough competent printers to deal with the print load that is required almost all on one day throughout the country. Unless the Government tackle that, the next general election will be beset by the same problems that led a judge in previous local elections in Birmingham to say that our system was the equivalent of that of a banana republic.

I want to concentrate briefly on the closure of a GP surgery in my constituency. In recent months, I have applied for an Adjournment debate on the topic and I make no apology for raising the matter today. Dedham in my constituency has an elderly population, many people without cars and no public transport infrastructure. In 2002, it was announced that the general practice outpost in the village would close. General practice services have been provided in there for more than 100 years. Although there was a stay of execution, the facility has now closed.

The key point is that a neighbouring practice in a neighbouring primary care trust provided services. A bureaucratic log jam then resulted in what amounts to a dispute between two health authorities as they try—or do not try—to resolve the matter. Constable practice, which provided the services, is in East Bergholt in Suffolk in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), and Dedham is part of North East Essex PCT. The news of the closure provoked an outcry and a substantial campaign. The Dedham patients steering group was

established to save GP facilities in the village. It mobilised the community and persuaded a local landowner generously to provide some green land—developers call it white land—as a site for building some social housing in conjunction with the Colne Housing Society, which is a housing association. A new GP surgery is piggybacked on the development. It was part funded by the East of England Development Agency to the tune of £95,000 and by Essex county council's communities fund in the expectation that the local NHS would agree, as it said it would, to continue to provide GP services.

Constable practice then broke its promise. It pains me to say this, but my comments reflect huge local frustration: the North East Essex PCT has been more obstructive than helpful. There is much good will and financial commitment from the local community. There are ways in which to reduce the premises costs to make the additional cost to the NHS of providing satellite services from another GP practice marginal. I have raised the matter with the strategic health authority and North East Essex PCT. I warned them that, if the problem was not resolved, there would be a row. I am now prepared to have that row.

I can only describe the letter that I first received from Dr. Paul Zollinger-Read of the North East Essex primary care trust as rubbish. He told me:

"There is no agreed mechanism for the transfer"

of money from the Suffolk primary care trust to the North East Essex primary care trust. That is perfectly true, but that was not a reason for giving up. He explained that if 1,000 patients transferred to a north-east Essex GP practice run on a satellite service, that would cost the NHS £330,000. However, that ignores the fact that cheap premises had been provided and that the NHS as a whole has to bear the costs of treating those patients anyway. The additional cost is much less.

Dr. Zollinger-Read then explained that life expectancy in Dedham is 82.3 years, as opposed to other areas, where it is as low as 70.1 years, as though that were an argument for making 80-year-old people travel further for their general practice services—in this case miles and miles further, to a neighbouring village. In fact, he simply highlighted the need for continuing the GP services promised to the people of Dedham, a higher proportion of whom are elderly and live longer, through no fault of their own. Moreover, surprising as it may seem, the Jarman underprivileged area index, which is a standard measurement of deprivation, shows that Dedham is by no means the most privileged part of my constituency. Indeed, it is more than halfway down the list of wards in my constituency. Therefore, it should be treated more fairly.

I also received a copy of a letter to the primary care trust from the Riverside health centre, which is a neighbouring GP practice in Manningtree. The proposal is for the Riverside health centre to operate satellite services in the new building at a much lower cost than was quoted by the primary care trust. I am simply not satisfied that the proposal has been considered in good faith. The letter says:

"We are extremely excited about the possibility of extending our practice boundaries to include Dedham and would look favourably on staffing the new building at Dedham...We would be prepared to open our list to Dedham patients, subject to agreement with the relevant authorities and subject to successful negotiation we could undertake to staff the new premises at completion."

The Riverside health centre has made it clear that from as little as between £30,000 and £40,000 a year, with up-front start-up costs of around £30,000, at least a part-time service could be provided on the premises. I do not know why the health authority has been so obstructive.

One problem is that, because the proposal depends on the transfer of people from one authority to another, some of the capitation payment will be lost. Ministers should address that issue, and I hope that the health authorities will support me in my representations to them to resolve the issue.

4.43 pm

Mr. Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I start by saying how pleasing it is to see my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House, a fellow Durham MP, on the Front Bench to answer this debate.

I would like to concentrate on an issue in my constituency that I have already raised in an Adjournment debate, which concerns View Lane park in Stanley and the absolute scandal of Derwentside district council selling more than half of the park to a development company called Mistal Homes, for a centre for the treatment of adults with autism. The company made an unsolicited bid to the council to buy more than half of the park. The bid was fiercely objected to by local residents, who value the green lung in their town centre. Despite that the council steamrollered ahead, as has become all too commonplace, and not only gave Mistal Homes planning permission, but sold it half the park. It did that even though the district council has no responsibility whatever for the provision of autism services or adult services; that is the function of the county council.

When the council took that decision, it did not look at the track record of the company. In fact, it had no track record, because it was registered at Companies House only in January 2006. Nor did it take a close look at the directors of the company, including a Mr. Hampshire, who declared to Companies House that he was a director of no other companies apart from Mistal. In fact, he is also a director of several other companies, one of which, Chartnell Ltd, is late in filing its accounts and Companies House has proposed that it be struck off. A post in the *London Gazette* last September suggested that the company in question was going to be wound up under the terms of the Insolvency Act 1986.

I raised my concerns and those of angry local residents with the Audit Commission earlier this year. I wrote to the commission on 1 February 2007. Alas, I did not get a reply until 4 July, as a result of a follow-up letter to the chief executive. I finally got a letter on 10 July from Paul Heppell, who described himself as the audit manager. He said in his letter that he had noted my

"concern about 'the adequacy of assurances gained by the Council over the potential buyer of the land'."

He went on to say:

[Mr. Kevan Jones]

"My understanding of the position is that the Council is not proposing to be involved in an ongoing contractual relationship or joint delivery of services with the developer."

Well, that is what I thought until a few weeks ago, when the leader of Derwentside district council, Mr. Alex Watson, and its chief executive, Mr. Mike Clark, had a meeting with the chief executive and the leader of Durham county council to ask the county council to procure 20 beds over a five-year contract for Mistal homes at the autism centre, even though the district council has no responsibility for the procurement of adult services. Quite rightly, the leader of Durham county council, Mr. Albert Nugent, and the chief executive, Mr. Mark Lloyd, were not going to be strong-armed by this approach. They wrote back to stress that the commissioning of services by the county council was done on an individual basis and that they could give no block contracts to the company.

This worries me. What on earth are the leader and the chief executive of a district council that has no responsibility in this area doing trying to procure business for a private company, Mistal Homes, which has no track record of delivering this type of service? I shall write to the Audit Commission again to ask about this matter, as there are some very serious concerns surrounding the entire deal. Who approached whom in the first place? What is the relationship between certain individuals on Derwentside district council and Mistal Homes? Mr. Heppell's letter goes on to say:

"In common with other sales of land, officers took the view that the track record and financial status of the developer or individual Directors was not relevant to the sale itself."

If the council is now going round touting for business for this company, what is that relationship?

Mr. Heppell is clearly not doing his homework. Part of the so-called deal relating to the sale of this land involved the reinvesting of a proportion of the capital sale of the park into improving the remaining park area. People ask whether that is really a concern. Well, yes it is. I raised this matter in an Adjournment debate recently. Derwentside district council has made no attempt to apply for lottery funding for improving the rest of the park, so it is relying on the success of this development for the improvement of this vital remaining piece of green space in Stanley.

There are some disturbing unanswered questions here. If the leader and chief executive of a council are touting for business for a private company, I want a full investigation into the matter. If that is not carried out by the Audit Commission—to which I shall write again, because I do not accept that it has carried out a full investigation—I shall refer the matter to the police.

This week, I was pleased to hear that Derwentside district council is to be abolished. That will be welcomed by many of my constituents. I am concerned, however, that the dying days of the council will lead to more shoddy deals like this, to fire sales of land, or to commitments with private companies, which will hamper the new unitary council's ability to make certain commitments. The Audit Commission and the Minister need urgently to ensure that no further dodgy deals like that are entered into in the next few months during the dying days of Derwentside district council.

I have welcomed the formation of a unitary council for Durham. Indeed, I think that it is long overdue and it will certainly abolish Derwentside district council and others that are, frankly, pathetic for having delivered such a poor service to my constituents for so many years. As I have suggested, that council has done things that are highly questionable, if not verging on illegal.

Durham now has an opportunity to have a dynamic and strategic new county council—not the existing one, but a new one. I understand that it will be painful for the 249 councillors to be abolished in the process, but it will lead to better governance in county Durham. In looking forward to the new county council, we should reflect on how best to promote the county and ensure that developments in former mining communities—across my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House—are pressed forward.

I would urge the Liberal Democrat council in the City of Durham, which is threatening judicial review, not to waste a single penny more of taxpayers' money on attempting to challenge the decision. My understanding is that there is no legal case whatever, so going ahead would be a scandal. I suspect that Durham taxpayers would never forgive the Liberal Democrats; they would quite rightly be very angry about it.

The decision to move towards a unitary council is part of a broader agenda, which includes the abolition of the regional assembly. Once again, I believe that that is long overdue. Regional issues about transport are important; and the new Select Committees announced by the Government—and designed to scrutinise what happens in the regions—are quite exciting. I believe that those new Select Committees will need to have teeth. They will need to hold to account not just the regional development agency, but organisations such as the Environment Agency and the strategic health authority. They should help to ensure that local people have a clearer understanding of how those organisations work, while also providing a key role for parliamentarians in this place to scrutinise the quango state of the north-east.

To conclude, I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and right hon. and hon. Members a successful and enjoyable recess. Speaking as a member of the north-east tourism board, it would be remiss of me not to say that if people wish to visit the north-east, there are great attractions in Northumberland, Durham, Teesside and Newcastle. No one coming to North Durham should miss the Beamish open air museum, in which the constituency takes such pride, and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods) has the fantastic attraction of the Durham cathedral.

4.52 pm

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): I was not intending to touch on the issue of the local government review, but following the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones), I shall do so. My part of the world is also going to see a new council. I greatly share the hon. Gentlemen's concern that in the transition period, the assets of previous councils will need to be monitored very carefully so that they are not

disposed of in a way that undermines the set-up of the new council. There will need to be greater devolution and a drawing down of powers from central Government to the new authority—an issue that Members in the Cornwall area will closely monitor.

It has been a very interesting debate. I shall touch on a couple of issues raised by other hon. Members. I believe that both the hon. Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) referred to access to banking.

It struck me that one of the key ways for people to gain access to free banking is through their local post office. A number of banks allow their account holders to withdraw cash free of charge from the local post office. It is important to put on record how important that service can be, particularly in rural areas. When the House returns after the recess, perhaps we should look into encouraging all banks to provide that service and support the post office in that way.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Davies) raised the issue of Remploy—its factory in my constituency is being proposed for closure. It is important that services for people with disabilities reflect the 21st century. I share the hon. Gentleman's concern that a number of people who have been employed by Remploy for a very long period have almost become institutionalised. It will be difficult for them to adjust to a new setting. In addition, Cornwall is very isolated, and people who may end up being based at another Remploy factory may have to travel greater distances. The needs of those vulnerable people must not be forgotten in the consultation process.

I wish to raise a constituency issue that is causing considerable concern: the proposed changes to fire cover across Cornwall, and particularly the proposal to downgrade two fire stations in my constituency, Falmouth fire station and Camborne fire station, which are the only two fire stations in Cornwall that provide 24-hour whole-time cover. Downgrading those stations to whole-time day cover only would mean that, across Cornwall, there would only be a retained service on offer at night.

To provide some background for those who are not familiar with Cornwall's geography, the fire authority is within the county council, but that covers an area of 3,500 sq km, and has only one neighbouring authority—the rest of it is surrounded by sea. In the vast majority of cases, it cannot rely on help and assistance from other authorities, so it must be self-contained. The authority has a total of 31 stations, 20 of which are entirely retained, five of which are day-crewed—precisely because of difficulties recruiting retained staff, as many people are self-employed and must travel all over the county, and hence cannot respond in time—and two of which are the 24-hour whole-time cover stations in Falmouth and Camborne.

Those two stations cover the most densely populated part of Cornwall. Camborne has a population of about 50,000 people and will grow further, and that was not taken into account when the proposals were put forward. Falmouth fire station not only has responsibilities to the town and surrounding area but to the docks and further out to sea, if there are problems there. In addition, both stations have specialist equipment that has been used to provide assistance all over Cornwall, for instance in the flooding at Boscastle. When there were blizzards on Goss moor, and people were stranded, that equipment was used to help. The stations are therefore not just an asset to their immediate community but provide an invaluable service to the rest of Cornwall, yet they are under threat of being downgraded under proposals currently being considered.

I want the Deputy Leader of the House to take back for consideration by the relevant Ministers the issue of how this situation transpired and what the Government can do to assist. Ultimately, it has transpired because Cornwall's local government has one of the lowest levels of funding in the country. As with other areas, Government grants have not kept pace with the cost of service delivery. As a result, there is an overall deficit of £15 million to be overcome. There is also the capping on council tax—the regressive council tax would not address the problem even if the Government tried.

Consequently, we are seeing cuts to a whole range of services. Adult social care has had no choice but to withdraw support for those with the lowest levels of need. The fire service is facing cuts of £1 million in costs—the equivalent of a cut of one sixth of the whole-time work force. Although that will be achieved without compulsory redundancies, it has significant implications for the cover across Cornwall.

The Government's nationally set targets conflict with what the fire authority is trying to achieve. According to the first public service agreement, the authority is required to reduce accidental fire-related deaths in the home by 10 per cent. and deliberate fires by 20 per cent. by 2010. The fire authority has already done a lot to reduce such occurrences, by providing a greater retained service, which it was asked to do, and by doing more school visits and so on. Therefore, it is already delivering. At the same time, however, there is a requirement to find efficiency savings totalling £105 million by 2007-08.

The problem is that, because the authority delivered efficiency savings and because things were so tight ahead of that requirement, the only way that it is going to make those further efficiency savings is to make front-line cuts. I ask the Deputy Leader of the House to take that back to the relevant Department. When setting that efficiency target to pay for the pay deal for firefighters, what account did the Government take of authorities such as Cornwall that have already delivered efficiencies and whose only alternative therefore is to make front-line cuts? Are they happy that, in areas such as Cornwall where efficiencies have already been delivered, there will be virtually impossible challenges in delivering both those targets?

We are already seeing the results in Cornwall, particularly in the area that I represent, of the freeze in recruitment in previous years. The local newspaper called Camborne

"the arson capital of Cornwall",

where there were

"218 attacks in the towns and their surrounding villages in the last 12 months, nearly a quarter of the 941 suspicious fires in the whole of Cornwall."

At the very time when arson appears to be increasing across the area, we are having to look at proposals to make cuts.

[Julia Goldsworthy]

Serious questions have to be asked about the integrated risk management plan process, which had the task of trying to deliver those cuts to make the books balance. The response to a parliamentary question that I tabled stated:

"Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) are required by the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework to have in place and maintain an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) which reflects local need and sets out plans to tackle effectively both existing and potential risks to communities." [*Official Report*, 16 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 76W]

But that bears little relationship to the correspondence that I have had with the chief fire officer, who is clear that the reason behind looking at cuts and looking again at the IRMP was the financial situation, not the risks. Undoubtedly cuts to the number of staff and the level of cover will have an impact on the risk to people living in that community.

The council and the chief fire officer are trying to do the right thing in coming forward with the proposals. They have openly acknowledged that those proposals are the least worst option, not the best option, and the chief fire officer himself said:

"I had to recommend this objective because I had to make savings. The downgrading of Falmouth and Camborne is purely a consequence of the budget".

Therefore, the people of Falmouth and Camborne are being asked to meet the brunt of the so-called cost-effectiveness drive, knowing that it will result in longer call-out times and that there will be knock-on effects across the county. The county council has agreed to look at that again and to undertake a risk assessment. I cannot believe that it was not required to do one in the first place. Will the Minister go back to the Department and say that there are serious pressures?

As a constituent wrote to me recently, people in Cornwall are not asking for fire services that are better than anywhere else in the country. We just think that we deserve the same level of fire service as the rest of the country. We do not want lives to be threatened because we have become the only county in the whole of England that has no whole-time fire cover at night.

5.2 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I will try not to detain you too long, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the warm embrace of your constituents, because I know that they await you, but I want to raise three things before—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the two hon. Gentlemen on the Opposition Benches share that hope more fervently than I do.

Andrew Mackinlay: Anyway, as I was saying, I want to raise three things with the House before we go. I have raised the first before on occasions such as this: it relates to the inadequate capacity of people such as me to remedy a wrong for my constituents in relation to access to railway stations. I refer particularly but not exclusively to Tilbury Town station in my constituency, where there is an inordinately high pedestrian bridge. There are no real facilities for people who are handicapped, semi-ambulant, or parents with pushchairs and prams. It is wholly inadequate. The upside goes to London. Most of the residential area of Tilbury is on the other side.

I have raised the matter over the years with the rail operator, successive organisations, including Railtrack and Network Rail, and with the former Disability Rights Commission, which did not seem adequately interested in my view. It was very disappointing. I hope that the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights will address that problem in Tilbury. I suspect that other hon. Members face similar situations. I acknowledge that it can be very costly to provide adequate access to and in railway stations, but it is a price that the community should pay. We cannot go on like this, and I hope that the Government and the new equality commission will take an interest so that the issue can be pursued and—I use the word deliberately—prosecuted with vigour. We need some remedy.

The second issue will also strike a chord with other hon. Members. Those who have been able to access their post today will have received a letter from Postwatch that draws attention to the fact that the Post Office is about to embark on the closure of 2,500 post offices. I was in a Committee the other day that agreed the funds to facilitate the reorganisation, but many of us are deeply concerned about the course on which the Post Office is embarked. Members of Parliament are realists about progress and we accept that some rationalisation is necessary, but we do not trust the Post Office to deal from the top of pack with us or our constituents.

There is to be a consultation period, but—surprise, surprise—it is at a time when Parliament will not be sitting. I know that many hon. Members will actively champion the cause of the post offices in their constituency, but in the same way that Governments go to war and coups d'état occur during recesses, the Post Office closes post offices during a recess.

I am especially concerned by the letter that we have all received from Postwatch. It draws our attention to the fact that the Post Office will bring forward 46 area plans, covering all parts of the UK and following parliamentary constituency boundaries—so far, so good. However, it continues:

"Postwatch will receive area plans, on a confidential basis, before each six week local consultation starts."

Why on God's earth will it be done on a confidential basis? It goes on to say that Postwatch will check whether the proposed closures meet its criteria, but those criteria—such as access, reasonable distance and adequate alternative premises—are precisely what the consultation should be on. I would prefer 12 weeks public consultation rather than six weeks of a confidential, cosy arrangement between Postwatch and the Post Office. We need 12 weeks to argue our corner and demonstrate the flaws in the decisions. I hope that those who read about our deliberations today will take note of that. When the Deputy Leader of the House replies to the debate, I hope that, as a Member of Parliament and as a Minister, she will undertake to seek out this letter and persuade ministerial colleagues that that is not a satisfactory situation. Hon. Members are universally concerned about the situation and, because we all bear the scars of how the Post Office operates, there is a lack of trust.

Mr. Hancock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Mackinlay: I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, because it would not be fair to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and I am your friend—or to others who wish to speak.

The hon. Gentleman might also wish to intervene on the final issue that I wish to raise, which relates to the welfare of our ex-servicemen and women. I have one particular constituent, Dennis Dimond, who is a former leader of the Conservative group on Thurrock borough council and a former officer of the Essex regiment, whom I consult regularly about such matters. We are especially exercised about those people who have left our armed forces, some of them many years ago and who are now in the evening of their lives and becoming fragile. They are not getting everything that they are entitled to and I invite the Deputy Leader of the House to ask ministerial colleagues to prepare, over the parliamentary recess, a comprehensive statement of care available for ex-service personnel, perhaps through a White Paper, Green Paper or other formal statement. In that way, we could take stock of the care available for our ex-service personnel. I am especially concerned about people who are wounded or suffer trauma, or both, in the current conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places in which our armed forces are committed—sometimes, of necessity, in a secret manner. Many of us are not satisfied that when they are discharged appropriate care and facilities are available at the time or will be sustained in the long term. Trauma or mental illness can arise much later and we need reassurance that the nation's commitment to ex-service personnel is comprehensive and that care will be ongoing. We need to understand how we as Members can assist and counsel such people, working with veterans organisations.

This morning, I received a letter from a parliamentary colleague, Eddie Lowey, a member of the Legislative Council of the Isle of Man. He has no access to this place, but on behalf of his constituents he wanted me to raise the case of an Isle of Man resident who served on Christmas Island between 1958 and 1959 and was involved in the atomic tests. A further 10 residents of the Isle of Man are in the same category, as are many of our constituents who served on Christmas Island at the same time. There is growing and compelling evidence that they were adversely affected by the atomic testing. Members who are listening to me will share the view that when the Ministry of Defence says, "Oh, it's really not a problem and we're monitoring it", that is not good enough. We heard the same thing about Gulf war syndrome.

I asked the Library to do some work on the subject, and my attention was drawn to a parliamentary question diligently raised by our colleague, the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper), on 12 July. He asked the Ministry of Defence to comment on the EU directive Euratom 96/29. The gentleman in the Isle of Man says that the directive requires the UK to have a national register of all persons who may have been exposed to ionizing radiation in the past, especially in relation to atomic weapons experiments in the 1950s. He notes that the directive states that such people should be independently examined for genetic damage by the calculation of the number of aberrant cells shown by translocation within their chromosomes, that cytogenetic assays, such as the eBand or mFish may be carried out by molecular geneticists and that there should be ongoing screening. Many former servicemen feel that their immune systems were irreparably damaged by exposure all those years ago.

In reply to our colleague, the hon. Member for Forest of Dean, the Minister said that the directive was not "legally binding". Well, whether it is or not there is a moral obligation and although the Minister acknowledged that the Government recognise their obligations to such veterans, he went on to make the worrying statement that they had found

"no general effect on the participants' expectation of life nor on risk of developing most cancers, though there was a small increase in risk of some leukaemias".—[*Official Report*, 12 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1599W.]

We have heard such denials all too often in the past. It is not good enough, so I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will tell the Ministry of Defence that over the coming months Members will increasingly demand that the issues are addressed on behalf of the people who suffered as a result of those experiments in the 1950s. A remedy should be found soon, rather than having a big row in the House of Commons in the future.

5.14 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay). I thought that he was going to wind up a little earlier and I was thinking that I might follow your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and rush over and embrace him, but he took all his time so I will not, you will be glad to know. I want to raise two issues concerning my constituency. As I am a Gloucestershire Member, the House will not be surprised to hear that I shall be raising the issue of flooding. I shall also raise the issue of ambulance cover.

I undertook a comprehensive tour of my constituency on Monday and Tuesday, and unfortunately I found that the flooding there was far more widespread than I had anticipated. I am keen to stress that, despite the high-profile news coverage of Tewkesbury and Gloucester, my constituency suffered quite considerably as well, to the tune of several hundred houses being flooded.

Perhaps I might acquaint the House with some of what I discovered on Monday and Tuesday. I started my tour at a small village near Lechlade in the south-west of my constituency, and I drove through rather a deeper flood than I should perhaps have done. I donned my wellies, rushed into a house—the water immediately went over the top of my wellies—and found a poor person whose furniture and carpets had been ruined. I then went on to Fairford, and even more dismayingly I found a road of houses that were under 2 ft of a mixture of sewage and water. The main bridge in Fairford had fractured and the main road was closed.

I went on to Bourton-on-the-Water—wryly called by one resident Bourton-under-the-water—and found, as many people may be able to picture Bourton-under-the-water, the picturesque village, the rivers, the bridges, the greens and the high street entirely under water, which had spilled over into many shops and houses.

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

Perhaps the biggest shock was when I went on to Moreton-in-Marsh, where I found that 250 people had been evacuated last Friday night to the fire college, their homes having been rendered unfit for habitation. I discovered that more than half the shops had been flooded, many of the houses near the station had been flooded, and many of the hostelries will not be open for many months.

I went on to the pretty town of Chipping Campden, where the Cambrook had burst its banks and many houses had been flooded. Likewise in Northleach the main culvert under the main high street had closed, and there a problem re-occurred that I had heard about in several other places. A road had been flooded and HGVs and cars trying to get through the flood, driving far too fast, were causing bow waves and causing even worse flooding into the houses—until a public-spirited local resident put his car across the road, effectively closing it. Even the main road into my own village was washed away.

Repairing the infrastructure will be expensive and time-consuming, and because it is spread over a very large area of the Cotswolds it will be expensive. I therefore issue this plea to the county council: that we in the Cotswolds should get our fair share of funding. I know that the high-profile cases of Tewkesbury and Gloucester will cause vast strain on both the county council's and the Government's budgets, but we are going to need some resources in the Cotswolds, not only to restore the infrastructure but to pay for emergency things such as the simple provision of Portaloos, sandbags and pumping equipment. There will need to be a substantial clean-up. I pay great tribute to the Cotswold district council for immediately swinging into action and providing a free collection service for ruined furniture and carpets. That was hugely appreciated by people on the ground.

Some of the flooding had been caused by the Environment Agency's policy of clearing out watercourses only on a biennial basis, on the grounds that to do so encourages biodiversity. That will need to be looked at again rigorously, because if it causes any possibility of flooding homes it is totally wrong.

I have mentioned the problem of sewer flooding. I had had a problem of sewer flooding in various places in the Cotswolds before this general flooding of water. Fortunately, I was able to persuade one of my two water companies, Thames Water, to advance a £5 million sewerage scheme in South Cerney, which did help this time, but there are many smaller instances of sewer flooding which will need attention. I call on the Deputy Leader of the House to bring the matter to the attention of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, because the regulatory regime needs looking at to ensure that water companies have sufficient ability to invest in the infrastructure from their profits.

I should also like to bring to the attention of the House a matter about which I received another e-mail from a constituent this morning. The flooding of the Mythe waterworks, which was raised in Prime Minister's questions yesterday, resulted in the cutting off of the fresh water supply to 340,000 people, which is being attended to by the provision of bowsers. It was widely advertised on BBC Radio Gloucester and on the website that a bowser would be available for the villagers of Birdlip in my constituency. There is, or was, no such bowser in that village. The villages have no fresh water and no bowser from which to get it. I urge Severn Trent Water urgently to attend to the matter.

Like many other Members of the House, I cannot express high enough praise for the emergency services, particularly the fire service, that worked throughout Friday night to pump out a vast number of houses. The community spirit that I found when I was going round on Monday and Tuesday was absolutely tremendous, but the problem is that that community spirit will give way in some cases to depression when the true extent of the damage sinks in. I urge all the social services and other support services to be in place when that happens.

The second issue that I would like to raise is the provision of ambulance cover in my constituency. The chief executive of the newly merged Great Western Ambulance Service NHS trust said to me in a letter of 4 July that

"rurally based resources have been pooled in to urban areas to cover higher density activity."

Ambulances are being taken away from rural areas and are being put into towns. In fact, that has already caused the loss of one life.

As it has been in the press, I would like to bring to the attention of the House the tragic case of a young lady, Rebecca Wedd. She was hit by a car just outside Cirencester, but the ambulance service took 45 minutes to attend to her. The incident was totally unacceptable and it occurred not in a rural village but near the Royal Agricultural college just outside Cirencester, which is the largest town in my constituency.

I will run over the facts of this particular case. The only ambulance available in Cirencester was not available that evening, because the entire crew had reported sick. At the beginning of the evening, there were five crews in Staverton and, when the ambulance service knew that no ambulance was available in Cirencester, I would have thought that it would have immediately deployed one of those crews to cover Cirencester, particularly when an event with 700 people was taking place there. There had been a serious incident at Tetbury further south in my constituency and three ambulances attended that. The Wiltshire air ambulance was also deployed, but it was delayed and did not reach the scene on time. However, most tragically, an ambulance was available in Swindon, a mere 15 miles down the dual carriageway, and the most shocking fact of all is revealed in a letter from the chief executive of the trust. He wrote:

"Gloucestershire Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre did contact the Wiltshire Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre, and ask for assistance—but this was declined."

A young lady tragically died because of that, and ongoing investigations are being carried out to discover what happened.

Sadly, that is not the only case. On 23 January this year, Evan Bailey, a 12-year-old boy from Coates, a small village a mere 3 miles from Cirencester, had his first ever asthma attack. Let us all imagine the panic of that small boy and his parents, Christopher and Rosemary, as he underwent that new and frightening

experience. Mrs. Bailey estimates that the ambulance was called at 10.15, but did not arrive until well over half an hour later at 10.50. He was subsequently moved to Gloucester hospital.

I am aware of those two examples of response times failing to live up to targets, but how many other constituents have had their lives put at risk? Despite assurances from the chief executive of the trust, I am not convinced that trust targets are being met even in the most urban parts of my constituency, let alone in the many far-flung villages, hamlets and farms of the Cotswolds.

I raised the issue of the merger of the Gloucestershire ambulance trusts in Westminster Hall, and I said:

"If someone is lying beside the road, dying from a motor accident...the one thing that that person wants is a quick ambulance response. The merger will inevitably slow down that response."

I went on to say:

"If they do not have a proper ambulance service when they need it, they will die. There is no question about that. We must be sure that the merger will work; otherwise, we are putting people's lives at risk."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 9 February 2005; Vol. 430, c. 442-44WH.]

I take no pleasure at all in saying that that prophecy sadly came true and I ask the ambulance trust to see what it can do to prevent it from ever happening again.

5.24 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I have sat here all afternoon listening to a catalogue of complaints, and I am now going to add to that catalogue. I am sorry that my complaint will be rather shorter than the others, but the sincerity with which I put it before the House and the Deputy Leader of the House—this is my first opportunity to congratulate her on her promotion to the Front Bench—is none the less for the shortness of the time available to me. The hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) said that she would have to gallop through her 12-minute speech. I can assure her that we do a lot more galloping in Leicestershire than they do in West Yorkshire.

I will do my best to bring to the attention of the House a matter that I have raised on a number of occasions: the noise that emanates from aircraft flying in and out of East Midlands airport and the disturbance it causes. I know that that matter concerns not only my constituents in Harborough, but the constituents of the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), who is not in his place at the moment, and other Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Members of Parliament.

The problem arises because East Midlands airport is the United Kingdom's freight hub. There are other airports—in particular, Stansted, Gatwick and Heathrow—that attract more traffic. However, Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted are at least what is called designated under the Civil Aviation Act 1982. *[Interruption.]* I am talking about the favourite subject of the hon. Member for South Derbyshire. He is about to come into the Chamber, and I am sure that when he does he will listen with great intent. Those three airports are designated under the 1982 Act, which means that the Secretary of State for Transport can control the numbers of flights that go in and out of them, particularly at night, between the hours of 11 and 7. There is no such control available to the Secretary of State in the case of East Midlands airport. On a number of occasions, Ministers have been asked to take on that responsibility, and, on every occasion, for one reason or another, they have refused to do so.

I have been told by the various aviation Ministers, who have followed one another almost as quickly as the aircraft coming into East Midlands airport, that there is no need for designation: everything is absolutely hunky-dory; the airport is controlling the noise; it is doing what it can to make sure that the aircraft flown by the aircraft companies obey the rules in relation to noise; and there is absolutely nothing to worry about. Ministers also say that it is entirely a matter for the airport, or for the Civil Aviation Authority. If one goes to the Civil Aviation Authority, it says that it is entirely a matter for the airport or the Government. If one goes to the airport, it says that it is entirely a matter for the Government or the Civil Aviation Authority. So, round and round we go. The last excuse I had was: "It's a matter of international agreement now. It's all dealt with by the European Union and, unless we can get some form of international treaty, establishing some form of control of aircraft noise, there's very little we can do." I am afraid that that will not do at all.

To be fair to the airport—and I am not always fair to it—it has introduced a system of fines and penalties, or surcharges, on aircraft that breach the airport's private noise levels. Wow—in the last accounting period the airport fined three aircraft, and introduced, I think, eight surcharges, of the thousands of aircraft that come in and out of the airport through the day and night.

The intention is that, under the master plan, by—I think—2012 there will be aircraft coming in and out of that airport every 90 seconds carrying freight from around the world. Of course, freight does not mind when it arrives; air passengers prefer to arrive during more civilised hours of the day. I went to the national air traffic control base at West Drayton just west of London not so very long ago. It is easily forgotten by those who operate that system, and also by the pilots of course, that below the aircraft and all those little dotty lights on the control panel are people—human beings—who want to get a good night's sleep. They are not getting it because of the noise.

In the few seconds remaining to me, I want to say that the other context in which the whole issue is being played out is a reluctance by airports to allow the debate to continue. They will do anything that they can to suppress debate. I took part in an interview on BBC Radio Leicester last Friday, and I was given the distinct impression that East Midlands airport's public relations team would rather the interview had not taken place. A public relations officer from the airport was there, ready to take part, but I got the distinct impression that he thought that the interview was wholly unnecessary, and that the issue was best not spoken about.

Let me finish on a point that gives the issue a national focus. Next week, Heathrow airport and its various holding companies are applying to the High Court for an injunction to prevent approximately 5 million Britons

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

from doing things that annoy it. The owners of Heathrow will attempt to ban them from the airport, the Piccadilly tube line, parts of the rail network and sections of the M25 and M4. The injunction would ban members and supporters of AirportWatch, an umbrella organisation, from setting foot on named locations in and around London. AirportWatch includes groups such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Campaign to Protect Rural England; I add in parentheses that the Queen is patron of both those organisations. If she is prevented from getting to Windsor castle for the weekend, I do not suppose that I shall be the first to know.

It strikes me as ridiculous that huge great companies, whether they be Heathrow's companies, or the Manchester Airport Group, which is owned by 10 local authorities in Manchester, and which wholly owns East Midlands airport, should resort to suppressing debate on a legitimate complaint about aircraft noise. My ability to debate is about to be suppressed, so I shall end my remarks voluntarily before you get to your feet, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I wish that the House and the Government would pay more attention to the damage caused to my constituents by the noise emanating from the airport.

5.31 pm

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I start by thanking all the speakers who took part in the summer recess Adjournment debate? Some of the faces are familiar, and some less so, and one Member admitted to being a newcomer to recess Adjournment debates. As usual, we have covered a number of subjects, including domestic and constituency matters. We have also covered the international spectrum. All arguments were put forward effectively and in excellent speeches, and I commend all hon. Members present for having stayed the course until almost the last minute before the recess.

The right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) started off the proceedings by expressing his concerns about local health provision. He raised the issue of the misuse of public funds, a subject that gives rise to controversy in all of our constituencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) raised a number of important points, including the efficiency of Ministers. I hope that the letter that she hoped would be on her desk by close of business today has duly arrived.

Angela Browning: No.

Mr. Vara: I am sorry that the letter has not arrived. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House has taken that on board, and that her assistants are dealing with it. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) spoke about drugs and their impact on the global market. I am sure that all of us in the Chamber are familiar with the distress and havoc that drugs cause, as a result of people coming to see us in our surgeries, and from the letters that we receive.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) raised the issue of the closure of a 24-hour clinic for mentally ill people, an issue that causes much concern. Mental illness carries an undue stigma, and it is right that we raise the issue as often as possible, so that we can get rid of that stigma. The hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) gave a learned speech about local education. It is noteworthy that he spoke of the interaction between all the schools in Norwich. Long may his local schools continue to flourish.

We then heard a passionate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley), who raised the important matter of British citizens in Australia not getting what can be called a fair pension. I very much hope that the Deputy Leader of the House took those arguments on board and that she will relay them to the relevant Minister. I wish my hon. Friend well in his campaign to get clemency for Krishna Maharaj on his visit to the United States during the recess.

The hon. Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) both made eloquent speeches on the need for a referendum on the European treaty. I was struck by the point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston when she rightly pointed out that the issue concerns not just a small number of people, but many throughout the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) spoke about Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust and the revelation of an £87 million deficit. That is an extremely serious matter, and I wish him and his community well in their efforts to resolve it expeditiously. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), a regular attender at Adjournment debates, spoke of the breakdown in British society. He was right to point out that the new Prime Minister cannot distance himself from the problems that have emerged over the past 10 years, because he has been closely involved in the running of the country over the past decade.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) raised a number of topics, including community initiatives. He highlighted the good work being carried out by Insight Radio for blind and partially sighted people, a group which is extremely vulnerable in our society. I am sure they welcome all that the radio does for them. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) spoke of the need for more council houses. Regrettably, I must inform him that in every year of the past decade less social housing has been built than in every year of the preceding Government.

The hon. Member for Hove (Ms Barlow) brought a light touch and a slightly happier tone to the debate by giving a big welcome to the new stadium for Brighton and Hove Albion. I am sure that all the supporters locally will join in those congratulatory messages. The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Davies) made an argument that comes regularly from Opposition Members about the importance of police officers being present on the street in greater numbers, rather than sitting at desks writing reams of forms. I hope that his point will add to the argument about police officers on our streets.

The hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) dealt with the breaches of electoral law—again, a matter that concerns many in the Chamber—and what happens at

local elections. She made a valid point about the need to ensure that there is proper training for returning officers and all their officials who look after elections in our constituencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), despite having lost his voice, made an enthusiastic speech. As usual, he covered a number of local issues. On the national level he was very serious, and I am sure we share his concern, about the threat to palliative care. We wish him well in his campaign.

The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) spoke about, among other things, the inaccurate bills and material received by consumers of British Gas. That is a serious matter which affects consumers of other utility companies as well. I wish him well in dealing with his constituents, and I hope that utility companies throughout the country will take note that the complaint is not confined to British Gas. My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) spoke in his first recess Adjournment debate, and what a welcome contribution it was, if I may say so. He drew attention to the closure of the GP service in one of his villages, a service that has existed for some 100 years. I hope that the dispute between the two health authorities will be resolved quickly, because people are suffering as a consequence of the failure to arrive at a solution.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) spoke about a number of issues. He raised several serious questions concerning the relationship between council officials and a private company. I believe that some serious answers are required, and I hope that he receives them.

The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) discussed access to free banking, which many people, particularly in rural areas, obtain through their local post offices. Many rural people are suffering in all sorts of ways with the decline in any number of other services. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House has taken that point on board and that she will relay it to the relevant Minister.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) made his speech in his inimitable style. He raised the serious issue of access for disabled people at Tilbury railway station. I wish him well for his constituents, and that important point needs to be taken on board by railway companies throughout the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) discussed the enormous difficulty and misery that many of his constituents are experiencing as a result of the flooding that has affected so many people throughout the country. The flooding will, of course, mean costly reparations for both infrastructure and people's houses and valuables. I think that hon. Members agree that it should be a priority when the House returns after the recess to have a debate in Government time on the lessons to be learned, so that in the event of a threat of future floods, we can avoid the damage and destruction that has occurred on this occasion.

Finally, despite being deprived of his full quota of speaking time, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) eloquently put forward all that he had to say. He discussed the noise and disturbance caused by aircraft flying in and out of East Midlands airport. Those of us who are fortunate enough not to live or work in areas where aircraft fly overhead sometimes underestimate the distress that aircraft can cause to those who have to put up with regular noise. The campaign will not be easy, but I know that he is a doughty campaigner on the issue. I wish him well and hope that there will be a resolution that brings a bit of peace to all those concerned.

All that remains for me to do is to wish all hon. Members and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a happy, peaceful and restful recess. I want to extend that wish to all the staff of the House and particularly to the security staff, who in these difficult times do so much to ensure that we can carry on living, working and trying to look after the interests of all whom we serve.

5.43 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Helen Goodman): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara), who has kept to his side of the bargain on keeping to time in a very co-operative manner.

I, too, shall begin with a confession: this is my first summer Adjournment debate. Now that I have been initiated into its mysteries, I hope that hon. Members will be satisfied by the way in which I respond to their points.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) raised a delayed private finance initiative project. As I understand it, the project has been delayed because the costs have risen by more than £200 million. That is obviously a matter for the Department of Health, and I will draw it to the attention of Health Ministers, but in so far as my right hon. Friend is concerned about the proper use of public money, that is, of course, a matter for the National Audit Office.

My right hon. Friend also raised the serious problem of video games, and I will refer the matter to colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Finally, my right hon. Friend raised the case of his constituent whose car had been impounded. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs are aware of that case, but I will ensure that Treasury Ministers take account of it.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) is concerned about the advent of unitary status in her county. I can tell her that the parliamentary question has now been answered, and I hope that there is a letter on the Letter Board. I will draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government to her concerns about the criteria. As for floods, I heard this morning that we have had more rain than in any summer since 1789, so she is right about the assessment of the flood plains.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) talked about the economy of the drugs market. When he began, I thought that I would be called on to refer those issues to the Home Office, or possibly to the Ministry of Justice, but as he developed his argument it became clear that the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development also have an interest in what is happening in this terrible trade.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) asked about the position of the Sri Lankan Tamils. I have been informed that the Border and Immigration Agency is actively engaging with detainees to discuss their concerns.

[Helen Goodman]

The hon. Gentleman talked about the housing problems in his constituency, his concern about the closure of Maudsley hospital, about post office closures and about transport. I hope that he realises that we are continuing with the Crossrail legislation because we are committed to that piece of infrastructure for the capital. The issue of financing will follow once the legal infrastructure is in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) talked about academies, particularly about Heartsease school in his constituency. He was concerned about the role of sponsors and the quality of education in that school, which has clearly been a controversial matter. It was evident that he is a former Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, given his particular concern about the quality of science teaching in the school.

The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) raised several issues. I am fully aware of the problem of overseas pensioners, which centres on the contributory part of the state retirement pension. He talked about the reconfiguration of hospitals in West Sussex and his frustration about that. I am sure that he is aware of the next-stage review that Lord Darzi will undertake. Although there may be some difficulties with the reconfiguration of the hospitals, his primary care trust has had a 31.2 per cent. increase in resources over the past three years, and waiting lists in the NHS south-east area are down from over 30,000 to 32.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised the question of the clemency appeal in the United States for Krishna Maharaj. I understand that the former Foreign Office Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), has written to the Americans about that and that British consul will attend the clemency hearing on 10 August.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) also talked about the Maudsley. She mentioned several policy issues where she has looked for significant change—cannabis, casinos, licensing and a referendum on the European Union treaty. I think that she will be more fortunate on the first three than on the last one. She spoke about the Post Office and the liberalisation of the postal market. I will draw her remarks to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs. It is quite clear that the current stand-off between employees and management is partly about short-term issues, but partly about some long-term policy questions.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) talked about the Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust, and was well apprised of the complex issues in NHS financing. He pointed out that guidance on how to run PFIs has improved with experience, and I remind him that it is up to the primary care trusts to commission local services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) talked about "The Governance of Britain" Green Paper and the need for it to have a more European emphasis. She also talked about her desire to see a referendum on the EU reform treaty. That is unlikely to be forthcoming because the Government's four red lines, which we set at the outset of the negotiations, have not been broken. That is the matter that will weigh most heavily when we see the final text of the treaty in September. She is absolutely right about one thing: to be a real European does not mean being totally uncritical of all things European. Like her, I speak as one with mixed parentage.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the Minister give way?

Helen Goodman: No. I am very sorry.

I had always known the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) as a quiet, charming, unassuming member of the Chairman's Panel, but he proved himself to be rather wilder than that in his assessment of the current state of the country, and he made a number of points with which I totally disagree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) talked about his ATM campaign. I think that I must have heard the first speech he made on that two years ago in Westminster Hall. It has been a very successful campaign and many people—in his constituency, in mine and in those of other hon. Members—will have benefited hugely from the work that he has done.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) referred to two constituency cases. I will draw those to the attention of the Home Office, and I will raise the question of the rights of the children concerned, as well as the rights of the women. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Ms Barlow) raised a connected case, which I shall refer to my hon. Friends in the Home Office and the Foreign Office.

I know that the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Davies) has been active in defending the interests of the Remploy factory in his constituency, and he raised the question of the way in which 90-day consultations operate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) raised important issues relating to the running of local elections, and she is quite right to say that those matters need to be referred to the Ministry of Justice. The hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) also talked about the Post Office.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) talked about the need to control utility prices, and I hope that he will be satisfied by the forthcoming energy Bill.

The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) referred to the closure of a GP surgery in his constituency. Closures of local facilities are a matter of concern, but I point out to him that hitherto, NHS resources were not fairly distributed. The north had far lower per capita resources than the south.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Jones) was unafraid, as usual, to challenge what he perceives as abuses. He has been energetic in covering scams and I shall raise the issues that he mentioned with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) talked about fire stations and the problems of providing services in rural areas. Again, I will raise the matter with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) spoke about Tilbury town railway station. He also asked about the way in which post office closure consultations will be handled and I will refer his comments to the Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs. He considered the welfare of ex-servicemen and women and called for a comprehensive care package, which should, of course, cover members of the Territorial Army. I will refer that matter to the Minister with responsibility for the armed forces.

The hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) talked about the serious problems that his constituents are facing because of flooding. Obviously, the whole House shares his concerns. He will be aware of the arrangements for keeping in touch with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers during the recess. The Department for Communities and Local Government will take on board his points about the long-term implications for water companies to provide sufficient investment. He, too, talked about some of the problems—in the context of ambulance cover—of providing services in rural areas.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) spoke about aircraft noise. I had expected it to be an issue for the Department for Transport or the Department for Communities and Local Government, but I forgot that he was a lawyer. His point about the injunction, if it is applied, is obviously for the Ministry of Justice.

I thank all hon. Members who took part in the debate. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues. I thank all the staff of the House, for their support not only this afternoon but since the previous recess. I wish everybody a pleasant recess. As well as continuing with all the great work in their constituencies, about which we have heard in the past three hours, I ask hon. Members to find some time to have a happy holiday.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney) (Lab): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

PETITIONS

Maudsley Hospital

5.57 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): For the second time, I present a petition about a matter that I raised during the debate on the Adjournment. My friend the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) also raised it. The hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara) warmly recognised that it was an important issue, and the Deputy Leader of the House referred to it.

I last did this job on 18 May, just before the implementation of the decision by the then Secretary of State for Health to close the 24-hour emergency clinic at the Maudsley hospital. The service was retained for longer than originally planned because of concerns and inadequate alternatives. The Government responded to initial pressure by putting much more money into King's College hospital. However, although the service has been transferred, it does not fulfil the community's needs.

I therefore have many more signatures from people who are residents of the London boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth, Croydon, Lewisham and others.

We have a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State for Health. We request that they consider the matter afresh. I hope that the petition will be well received and not fall on stony ground.

The petition states:

The Petition of the London Boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth, Croydon, Lewisham and others declares the Petitioners' serious concerns about the decision to close the 24 hour emergency mental health clinic at the Maudsley Hospital, Denmark Hill in Camberwell.

The Petitioners further declare their anxiety that new replacement facilities at King's College Hospital will not be ready for a further 18 months and that even then they may not constitute an adequate replacement.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Health to postpone the full closure of the 24 hour emergency mental health clinic until the incoming Prime Minister and Health Ministers have an opportunity to review the situation.

To lie upon the Table.

St. George's Day

6 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of my constituency and many thousands of people from further afield, who are concerned that England has no public holiday to celebrate Englishness and believe that St. George's day should be a public holiday for all those in England, so that we, along with other countries, can have a national day to celebrate. Other countries, most notably the Republic of Ireland, are proud of their national days, yet in England we have none. The petition has been signed by no fewer than 1,500 people and states:

The Petition of residents of the Borough of Havering

Declares the petitioners' serious concerns over the lack of celebrations on our patron saint's day, and believes that the establishment of St. George's Day as a national public holiday for all in England would help raise community cohesion at both a local, and more importantly, a national level.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to use his powers to establish St. George's Day as a national public holiday for all in England.

And the Petitioners remain.

To lie upon the Table.

Flooding (East Leeds)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Blizzard.]*

6.1 pm

Mr. George Mudie (Leeds, East) (Lab): I am grateful to raise the issue of flooding in my constituency and in Leeds generally. As the television pictures continue to come in, there are worries that the earlier flooding in the north might be discounted. One example of our worries is the great city of Leeds.

The day before the floods hit Yorkshire, the Environment Agency told Leeds that the rain, which eventually landed on Sheffield, would actually hit Leeds. The Environment Agency and the city council estimated that 1,500 homes, 35,000 house units of commercial property, the main rail station and the M1, electricity sub-stations, sewage works and other services would all be flooded. It is very sad that the wind changed direction and the floods hit Sheffield, but those estimates demonstrate how close Leeds was to disaster.

I am grateful to the Minister and the Government that the £100 million flood defence scheme that was suspended in January was reinstated in July. However, the worry is that it is still to be designed and agreed, and that it still has to be bid for against other priorities. I thank the Minister for the reinstatement, but I put down a marker and ask that he recognise the genuine worry that, even with the reinstatement and disregarding the worries of bidding, building will still not start until 2010-11. Leeds, a major city, will be in peril for four years and beyond, until the scheme is in place, and that is all supposing that it will win in competition with other schemes. I therefore want to take this opportunity to spell out, in human and economic terms, the effect on the city and the effect on the west Yorkshire economy if anything happens to that commercial hub.

The second matter that I want to raise is similar and relates to my constituency. Set against the painful scenes of disaster that we have witnessed recently, one could describe the flooding in my area as localised flooding; but whether it is national, widespread or localised flooding, it still affects people in the same way. It might involve smaller numbers, but it has the same effect, and causes great distress and trauma to any householder who has had their house flooded.

In my area, Foundry lane, Seacroft, Wykebeck Valley road, Whitkirk lane were all affected by flooding in varying degrees, but the hardest hit area was Dunhills, a small, well-established estate that is not built on a floodplain. Its houses have been there for 60 to 70 years and are all owner-occupied. The Wyke beck meanders, usually peacefully, through the middle of the estate. It is therefore unprecedented that it has flooded in each of the past three years. Residents have had to spend months out of their homes, living in hotels and in other people's houses.

A good friend of mine, George Summersgill, has lived on the estate all his life, but he is now living in a mobile home van in his drive. I have seen the effect that that has had on George. He is a big, strong man in his 70s, but he has visibly diminished in spirit over the three years. Every year, he and his wife have gone through the trauma and got their home back to normal, only for it to be destroyed again the next year. This year it has happened again.

This might be a small-scale matter, but it involves the same point that I made about the city centre, which I want to bring to the Minister's attention. An alleviation scheme is under consideration, but I am dismayed to find that it will take 18 months for it to be agreed upon, designed and put up for bids. I am sure that there is nothing that the Minister can do about this, but even if a bid succeeds, the physical work will still be more than two years away. I am sure that hon. Members will be able to imagine the fear and apprehension of the residents, having already had three years of continuous flooding. Will the Minister accept that the regularity of the flooding makes the area a strong contender for further attention? I understand that he cannot make a decision on something that is going to happen 18 months from now, but I am seeking words of comfort from him on behalf of my constituents.

The third matter that I want to comment on demonstrates the value of this Chamber and the value, whether we believe it or not, of Adjournment debates. Or perhaps this is just a coincidence. Ten days ago, my very good friend, Councillor Michael Lyons, some residents from the action group, led by the tireless David Davenport, and I met city council officials and representatives from the Environment Agency to discuss the 70 households on the estate that have been severely damaged over three consecutive years. In view of the fact that perhaps two or three years will have to pass before an alleviation scheme is built and working, we were asking for the kind of personal protection that is available for those homes, on the basis of the unacceptable regularity of the flooding, and of the fact that it would be so long before the scheme was agreed. We discussed the scheme for many hours with the officials, but the difficulty was the funds.

Ah, the value of an Adjournment debate! At 11 o'clock this morning—by total coincidence—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Leeds city council put out co-ordinated press releases to say that they had found the money and would conduct a pilot scheme with the 70 houses. I would like to thank the Minister, and to thank Mr. Speaker and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to have this Adjournment debate. I also want to thank this listening Government, who have found the money for the protection. I genuinely thank the Minister on behalf of my constituents. However it was organised and co-ordinated, it is very welcome.

I should like briefly to touch on the help that is going to householders generally. In my eyes, the Government have handled the flooding problems with great restraint and sympathy, but I believe that they have still to adopt a coherent line on what help to give to individuals. When I raised the matter on the Floor of the House, I asked what help was to be given to the uninsured. I was gently lectured—the Secretary of State is a gentle Minister—on the need not to demotivate householders from taking out insurance, which has been a stock response of Ministers over the years. However, the line seems to have changed and, thankfully, money has been sent round. At the moment, I believe the sum is £20 million. It was £10 million, but it has been doubled.

I would be delighted if the Minister had something up his sleeve and was about to tell me that it is now even more. That would be excellent.

Leeds has something in the region of £200,000 as its share of this pot. However, money is being given to businesses in Yorkshire and the regional development agency has proudly offered every small business affected in any way by flooding £2,500—on completion of one sheet of paper. I do not criticise that. Money is going to local authorities to meet repair costs on public buildings, and I do not wish to criticise that. The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has made an announcement of a bigger amount than the hardship fund for residents—offering money for schools that have been damaged in the floods. That is welcome.

In all those cases, however, the question whether offering those funds is demotivating local authorities, businesses and education authorities from taking out insurance does not seem to have been asked. I always thought that local authorities took out insurance and that schools did so through the LEA. I would expect businesses to do the same. The money is very welcome, though, as I have said. I am not challenging the extra money being given, but it seems so tokenistic.

If the Minister had not found the money this morning for this personal scheme, the money given to Leeds for householder hardship would not have covered the personal security for the 70 properties in question. Hundreds of houses were affected this year in comparison with last year and the year before that. I wonder on what basis the money is supposed to be distributed: is it per head, is it to every property, how does it fit in with what I mentioned earlier? I never complain about the Government giving money, but it is early days yet, and given the scale of the flooding throughout the year, I believe that a coherent line would be useful.

On a related matter, I would like to ask the Minister about the behaviour of the insurance companies. Because of the problems we have suffered, I have organised a special insurance advice surgery in my patch next week. I worry about the tales I hear about increased premiums, huge rises in excess payments and the fact that the insurance companies are, as we all know, great at collecting but bad at paying out. The Minister might well say, "Well, that's just tales", but last night's *Yorkshire Evening Post* ran a story about a Dunhill resident, Mr. Beehary, whose garden and house have been flooded for three consecutive years. I have been amazed and saddened at what has happened to that retired couple. Their insurer, Lloyds, insists that they meet the first £10,000 of the costs of the damage from this year's floods. In anybody's terms, that seems pretty unacceptable behaviour on the part of the insurance company—and it is contrary to what the industry says publicly about how sympathetically it will treat people who have been flooded.

Senior members of the Government recently met members of the insurance industry and it would be helpful if the Minister could tell us what undertakings were given by the industry. Perhaps people in areas affected by floods could be given a copy of the minutes of that meeting so that they can be in possession of the terms of what was offered and agreed by the insurance industry, which would also help us to advise and properly represent our constituents.

Briefly, I want to put on the record a matter relating to surface flooding. I mentioned Foundry lane, which suffers regularly from water coming over from a sports field behind the houses. That is a dangerous and recurrent problem. According to my research, no one currently has any responsibility or duty to resolve flooding arising from such surface water run-off from fields or open space. Section 94 of the Water Industry Act 1991 states:

"It shall be the duty of every sewerage undertaker—

that is, the private water companies—

"to provide, improve and extend such a system of public sewers (whether inside its area or elsewhere) and so to cleanse and maintain those sewers as to ensure that that area is and continues to be effectually drained".

The water companies, however, refuse to see it as their responsibility when houses are knee-deep in water that has run off fields and highways. The reason that they give is that the legislation only empowers them to provide sewers, and sewers are elsewhere defined as drains serving premises, not open land.

Many parts of Leeds have no natural watercourses. Consequently, overland flows cannot soak away and cannot go into sewers. There is no solution that anyone has a duty to implement. Section 94, which was originally a duty on local authorities under the Public Health Act 1936, has been rendered meaningless. Councils and the Environment Agency have permissive powers to carry out flood alleviation works on ordinary watercourses and main rivers respectively, but no duty to do so. Section 105 of the Water Resources Act 1991 says that the Environment Agency shall exercise a general supervision of all matters relating to flood defence. The Environment Agency, however, has no general responsibility for solving flooding problems, and hardly ever exercises any sway over the water companies.

It is vital that the duty to drain effectually the area should be made enforceable, even if it is lifted out of the Water Industry Act and given to the Environment Agency; otherwise, there is no point in Ministers calling for greater co-operation between the various agencies to resolve flooding problems. Putting that on the record might be useful for the review rather than for instant answer, so I would appreciate it if the Minister noted that and passed it on.

I want to comment on how the authorities responded to the floods in my area and nationally. Three years ago, I was depressed by the lack of dynamism and interest shown by each of the authorities. For example, when a street was flooded, with water coming up to people's doors, buses and traffic, including sightseers in their cars who came to see what was going on, were allowed through, which caused waves to go into houses and flooding. We could not get the police to come and divert the traffic. They said that it was not their responsibility. Instead, a brave female member of the public stood under an umbrella in an electrical storm diverting the traffic. The local fire brigade would not come to pump out houses unless the householder agreed in advance that they would pay a certain amount to the fire service.

Nationally, and certainly locally, the position has changed. This year, my constituents are full of praise for the responses that they received. That has been helped by individual behaviour by staff who have shown great sympathy and dedication. That might mask, however, the lack of a formal indication of an

[Mr. George Mudie]

agreed system to work during emergencies—a tried and trusted system that swings into action in the event of a disaster or emergency. Individual acts of great concern can mask a lack of control and accepted co-operation at a higher level—I am speaking not about Government, but about the district and authority level. I have now written to both the fire and police services to ask what their agreed policy is on how to operate and respond in an emergency. I am not sure what the flooding policy of each of the services is.

We are finding, during the present period, nationally as much as locally, that the flooding seems to have come as a surprise to some authorities and to many people who have had to deal with it, but it is true that there has been a right British spirit. Everyone has risen to the challenge. However, as disasters often lead to loss of life, I would like the Minister to assure the House that I am being unduly pessimistic, that each area has an agreed control and operational system and that, without the general public being aware of it, those systems are quietly tested in regular exercises to iron out any difficulties.

I again thank the Minister, but above all I thank those individuals in the emergency services who worked with the residents in the hopeless and sad task of trying to stop the flooding from damaging their houses. The individual acts of kindness and devotion to duty deserve the thanks of the House.

6.20 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Phil Woolas): The traditional congratulations are due to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, East (Mr. Mudie) on securing the debate, which is enormously important and timely. One would never have imagined that an Adjournment debate on flooding would follow the summer recess debate. That shows how pertinent the debate is. I assure him that the Government have not forgotten the June floods. Indeed, immediately before this debate, I attended a ministerial meeting on flood recovery following the June floods, and ministerial visits have been made this week to find out the situation for ourselves. I ask him to take that message back.

I will answer the specific points on Leeds, because that is what will be of most value to my hon. Friend in the time that I have available, but briefly to answer his questions on the insurance companies, I and ministerial colleagues met the Association of British Insurers two weeks ago to discuss that point and to reinforce the message that he and others have passed on. The Leader of the House announced arrangements for Members of Parliament with concerns to get in touch during the recess, and a letter will be sent to him from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The press statement that was issued after the meeting gave a full account of the points agreed at the meeting, where the statement of principles was reinforced and the assurances that were sought were given.

On drainage co-ordination, my hon. Friend kindly made the point that it has already been announced that that is a matter for the review. It is also fundamental, core business for my Department. Irrespective of the recent floods, that is an area of huge policy attention.

On my hon. Friend's specific point about the authorities' response, I concur that no civil resilience planning can substitute for the resilience of the public. It does not work without them and without individual acts of initiative and of people taking responsibility. However, the fact that the response this time was much better than three years ago is a tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) and the former Deputy Prime Minister my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), who put into place the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 precisely to ensure that, at local level, there is co-ordination under a single command and control structure—the gold command. I suspect that the better responses that my hon. Friend has had reflect that point.

We are aware of the problems in Leeds generally and of the Wyke beck situation in my hon. Friend's constituency. I am advised that there have been five flooding events in the past seven years, three of which were especially serious and affected up to 70 properties. The Environment Agency is undertaking a study using previous flood studies and hydraulic models to identify detailed flood risk areas and the constraints within the river channel. Some 20 possible options for flood alleviation have been identified, based on site visits, past flood events, flood studies and discussions with Leeds city council and Yorkshire Water. The Environment Agency will assess the options and evaluate their impact on reducing flood risk. That work will be completed in around three weeks' time. The next stage will be to assess the costs and financial benefits of the options, together with identifying any environmental improvements. It is likely that that element of work will be contracted to consulting engineers.

We have also been asked, through the agency, to assess whether a footbridge is causing a constriction to the river flow at the Dunhill Rise estate. A river gauge has been installed to provide a flood warning service based on empirical evidence. It will be available for operation in September 2007. As my hon. Friend will know, a flood warden network has also been established.

In terms of future development, there is the Leeds plan, and my hon. Friend mentioned the reinstatement by the agency of the money. The time factors are in part dependent on, and a function of, the funds available, but I assure my hon. Friend that we weigh the risk factors, including the population and economic importance of Leeds, in deciding such matters. I hope that he can take reassurance from that.

I hope that I can convince the House of the truth that it is entirely a coincidence that the pilot project money for resilience has been made available at the same time as my hon. Friend's Adjournment debate. The fact is that the robustness of the bid made it clear that it should be successful and I was simply acting on recommendations from experts and officials. I am grateful nevertheless for my hon. Friend's thanks. I hope that I have answered my hon. Friend's specific questions and given him some good news to take back up the M1, or on GNER, if he is looking after his carbon footprint.

The next major policy initiative in the area, which current events will feed into but which was happening anyway, is the thorough review of the flood risk management policy in the cross-Government "Making space for water" strategy. That looks at the issue in the round, including risk from all forms of flooding, such as rivers, sea, ground water, surface run-off and sewers. We are looking at a broad range of management measures and aiming to improve management of the risk nationally by giving the agency a strategic overview of all forms of flooding in close partnership with local authorities, the water companies and others. We have already announced the detailed form that that new role will take on the coast and we have invited initial views on the situation inland. The responsibilities and co-ordination concerning urban drainage are complex. Water and sewerage companies plan for future demands on the public sewerage network, and Ofwat has been working with them to develop 25-year sewerage supply and demand plans that will take account of our climate change expectations.

The Government have significantly increased funding, from £600 million to £800 million for the next spending review period—a considerable increase on earlier capital budgets. I emphasise again that the reduction forced on the Environment Agency owing to pressures in the financial year was on recurrent expenditure, not capital expenditure. However, my experience of the exceptional circumstances of the past few weeks suggests that no amount of funding could have prevented the disasters we have seen.

I send my good wishes to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the House and, especially, to the victims of flooding in my hon. Friend's constituency and throughout the country. I assure them that the Government will not take their eye off the ball during the recess.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Six o'clock till Monday 8 October, pursuant to Resolution [16 May].

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 17 July 2007

[MR. PETER ATKINSON *in the Chair*]

Immigration

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Watts.]*

9.30 am

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): I last initiated a debate on immigration matters in this House on 18 March 2003. The then Minister for Citizenship and Immigration, who is now the Minister for Children, Young People and Families, dismissed pretty much out of hand the serious and detailed points that Conservative Members made to her. Events have proved that she was totally wrong to do so, for this is a matter of the greatest and most profound concern to all our constituents, and I very much regret that it has been often inadequately and always insufficiently addressed in the House of Commons. I am thus grateful for this opportunity to return to a matter of such gravity for the country.

I was taken by an article in *The Observer* on Sunday by Henry Porter. He correctly made the point that our British way of life is

"tolerant, spirited and full of humour."

We often forget that Britain is a successful and largely good-natured society despite having to absorb 2 million or more people from scores of countries around the world over the last 10 years.

He went on to state:

"If you ever wanted to see the accumulated virtue of British culture you might start with the humour, consideration, tolerance, generosity and all-round nous to be found in any mixed gathering anywhere in these islands."

We should all rejoice at that, but ahead lie some dangerous shoals that could threaten the harmony. The issues must be dealt with and debated more regularly, in a calm and sensible manner.

There have been many debates about asylum but it is no longer the main issue. The principle of asylum for genuine cases is not disputed in this House. In any case, those numbers are now, thankfully, coming down: asylum now accounts for only some 6 per cent. of net foreign immigration. Nor is the debate about our existing legal immigrant communities. They are a valued part of our society, and they have enriched and often greatly enhanced it.

The serious issue for this House and for our country is the sheer scale of immigration that is now taking place. It is utterly misleading to claim, as some do, that people became used to immigration in the past and will do so again. The present scale of immigration is absolutely without precedent in our history. There have been only two major waves of immigration since the Norman conquest in 1066: the Huguenots in the late 17th century, and the Jewish refugees in the 19th and 20th centuries. Both those migrations were spread over 50 years, and both amounted to less than 1 per cent. of the population of Britain at the time. With foreign immigration currently running at 300,000 a year, we are now receiving an additional 1 per cent. of our population every two years. In other words, annual net foreign immigration is now 25 times higher than it has ever been in the past, even at the two peaks.

Talk of Britain as a nation of immigrants is absurd. It would be much more accurate to describe us as a nation of emigrants. Indeed, the number of emigrants exceeded the number of immigrants until the 1980s. Net immigration is a new phenomenon and initially was quite small. Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, it hardly exceeded 50,000 a year. Since 1997, however, it has quadrupled to some 200,000 a year. Even that number makes little allowance for immigration from eastern Europe. In 2005, it was assessed as a net inflow of 64,000—a figure that today looks remarkably low. None of those numbers include any allowance for illegal immigrants, who are believed to comprise at least half a million people.

The sharp increase in immigration is no accident. To suggest, as Ministers do, that it is all a result of the fall of communism or of globalisation is, frankly, bizarre. The numbers point clearly to a massive increase since the present Government came to power in 1997. Part of the increase is due to their failure during their first five years in office to get a grip on asylum claims, of which more than 60 per cent. were eventually judged to be unfounded. Another part is due to their decision to allow a massive increase in work permits, which have trebled since 1997. At the same time, their decision in June 1997 to abolish the primary purpose rule has led to the number of spouses admitted to Britain doubling from 20,000 to 40,000 a year.

Those policy shifts have had a substantial impact on our population. Just over 1 million people have been granted British citizenship in the past 10 years. Net foreign immigration during that period was more than 2 million people, or 600 a day. That rate of immigration cannot be sustained without the most profound changes occurring in our society.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): My hon. Friend has raised an important subject in a calm and considered manner. I am delighted that he has recognised the importance and value of immigrants. Is he aware that since I came into Parliament—

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Which time?

Bob Spink: The first time. We have an additional 300,000 immigrants each year. At the same time, we have a Government who are paying to keep out of employment about 17 per cent. of the potential work force, and we have a critical housing shortage. Does my hon. Friend link those matters together, and does he think that policy should control them?

Mr. Soames: I am always grateful to my hon. Friend for his interventions, but, if I may, I shall come to those matters in my own time.

Looking ahead, the Government's projections anticipate that we will add 1 million to our population every five years. Of that increase, 83 per cent. will be due to new immigrants and their descendants. Even that forecast is based on the cautious assumption that immigration will fall by about 30 per cent. from its

[Mr. Soames]

present level and remain flat. It is still too early to judge how many east Europeans will turn out to be temporary visitors and how many will stay on as immigrants. However, it is at least possible that they will sharply increase the pressure on our population.

If proof were needed, consider the Prime Minister's speech to the House last week. After 10 years in government, he has discovered that there is a housing crisis, particularly in respect of affordable homes. Why? Because for years, demand has outstripped supply. The Government have permitted—indeed, encouraged—the arrival of 2 million immigrants since 1997, but have completely failed to build the necessary houses or the wider social infrastructure that is so vital. They have not even built enough social housing to match the number of grants that they have made of asylum and other forms of protection. All those people qualify for social housing and many, but not all, will take it up.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point. I wonder whether he heard the Prime Minister interviewed by John Humphrys on the "Today" programme last week. The Prime Minister said that he recognised that demand was outstripping supply, but completely ignored Mr. Humphrys when he suggested that immigration may have played some part in that. Does my hon. Friend think that the Prime Minister is in denial in respect of the points that he so rightly raises?

Mr. Soames: I do not know whether the Prime Minister is in denial, but it is a fact that the Government persistently refuse to discuss the matter in public. They adopt what I understand is called in America the "ostrich" defence.

Looking ahead, the Prime Minister trumpets his plan to build 3 million houses by 2020. Many of them will have to be on greenfield sites. What he omitted to mention was that 1 million of them will be not for existing immigrants, who are now a valuable part of our community, but for new immigrants, and that even that vast number depends on the Government's assumption that immigration will fall by 30 per cent. from present levels, and stay flat thereafter.

Housing is vital to the future of every family in this country. It is now unaffordable for key workers in many parts of the country, and millions of young people are unable to get on the housing ladder. The Government's record on housing is a miserable tale of incompetence and is a complete failure of joined-up government. That record has largely resulted from their failure to face up to the practical consequences of mass immigration, but it is also a result of the failure of Members to talk about key national issues in the House in a sensitive and intelligent manner. That failure is reflected in the media, including the BBC, which reported the proposal to build 3 million houses without even mentioning the I-word. The BBC's present work on impartiality should lead it to ensure that the basic facts about immigration are clearly and accurately set out. Dodging sensitive issues is simply not good enough, either for the BBC or for us.

The infrastructure of schools, hospitals and roads must also be considered because immigration levels mean that we are committing ourselves to building a city the size of Birmingham every five years. International migration flows are predominantly to England—the most densely populated part of the United Kingdom—which is already four times as crowded as France and 12 times as crowded as the United States. Pressure on public services will also inevitably grow. The health service is facing additional strain, not only because of numbers and the need for interpretation services, but because some of our new arrivals require major treatment. Immigrants have certainly contributed a great deal to our health service. However, although the flow of indigenous doctors and nurses has improved, they now have difficulty securing entry-level positions because they have been filled by immigrants.

The pressure on our education system has also increased, not only because of the numbers of immigrants, but because many pupils arrive with no English. Clearly, the local authorities most affected must be helped to deal with those problems. However, it has become abundantly clear that our statistical information is completely inadequate to trace the flow of migrants around the country. Indeed, the Minister and I have been in protracted correspondence about the Government's absolute failure to formulate any idea of how many people fail to turn up after they have been granted temporary admission, and then fail to show again. In any case, the only effect of central Government subsidy is that the taxpayer, rather than the ratepayer, pays. The costs still fall on our society.

Understandably, there is also major concern about, and question mark over, social cohesion. Migrants now arrive at a rate of nearly one a minute. All those people need to be integrated into our society, and it is clearly impossible to achieve that at the present rate and in the current situation. Indeed, some immigrants choose, for entirely understandable reasons, to join people of their own origin. Unfortunately, that leads to the development of parallel lives. In September 2005, Trevor Phillips, when he was head of the Commission for Racial Equality, said that we are "sleepwalking into segregation". He has since warned that the degree of segregation in parts of our country is wholly unacceptable.

The follow-up report on Oldham, which was written five years after the riots in that town, expressed similar anxieties. Its key finding was:

> "A major factor in building community cohesion in Oldham over the next two decades will be projected population change within the Borough and, in particular, the relative growth in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage population. The potential risk is that pace of change in building community cohesion may be overtaken by the potential for population change to generate division and conflict."

What lies behind that is that, in the next 15 years, the Pakistani heritage population is expected to increase by 50 per cent. and the Bangladeshi population by 70 per cent. Meanwhile, the white population will decline slightly. That is just one example of the pressure building up in some of our cities.

The Government claim that massive levels of immigration are justified by the economic benefits. Certainly, there are some benefits: wage inflation has been held down, interest rates are lower than they might have been, and economic growth is slightly faster. However, most of the benefit goes to immigrants themselves. The benefit to the native British population in terms of gross domestic

product per head is extremely small, even according to the Government's own calculations. They keep changing their story, but they now claim that immigration adds 15 to 20 per cent. of trend growth which, in turn, is now 2.75 per cent. The arithmetic shows that that amounts annually to around 73p per head per week, at the most. Similar results have been found in major studies in the US, Canada and Holland. I challenge the Government to produce any evidence that immigration makes a significant difference to GDP per head, and therefore to the indigenous population.

As I have said, the reality is that most of the economic benefit goes to the immigrants themselves, which is, of course, why they come. The Government persistently duck the central issue of benefit to our own community. There are, of course, benefits that cannot be measured, such as those of a social and cultural nature, and perhaps a greater propensity for people to innovate. Social costs are becoming more widely understood, and a survey that the Institute of Directors conducted of its members in February this year noted that 85 per cent. agreed that immigration policy should take account of the impact on public services and housing. Some 80 per cent. agreed that it should also take account of the effect on social cohesion.

It is often argued that immigration fills skills gaps and thus contributes to the smooth running of companies and the economy. There is something in that, but in the long term, immigration cannot be the answer to skills shortages. As the Confederation of British Industry recognises, the key must lie in training and retraining our own work force, which consists of some 30 million people. Only recently, on 5 June 2007, the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce warned that

"skilled, work hungry migrants are masking the tragic lack of skills so many of our school leavers have."

Other arguments put forward by the Government are simply false. The suggestion that immigration is of any significant help in paying our pensions was dismissed out of hand by the Turner commission, which reported that:

"Only high immigration can produce more than a trivial reduction in the projected dependency ratio over the next 50 years. It is important to realise that this would only be a temporary effect unless still higher levels of immigration continued in later years."

The public sense that there are falsehoods in the Government's arguments. Two thirds of people simply do not believe them, and 75 per cent. want an annual limit on immigration. That is the point to which I shall now turn. I believe that an annual limit is the key to restoring public confidence in our immigration system, which is now at rock bottom. My first proposal is that the level of net foreign immigration be managed downwards until it is close to the level of British emigration, which is running at about 100,000 a year and has doubled under this Government. Such a policy would mean that we were no longer adding to our population through immigration, and would relieve the pressure on our infrastructure and public services. That would require a reduction in the number of work permits, a tightening of the regulations on family reunion and much stronger efforts to remove failed asylum seekers.

It is important to recognise that limits cannot be applied to citizens of the European Union—which is not, as some allege, a matter of racism, but a consequence of treaties signed by British Governments of all political persuasions. The tough immigration policies that I advocate are not a matter of race. They would, for example, apply in the same way to Ukrainians and Ugandans, and to Americans and Indonesians. Fortunately, the omission of EU citizens from a new immigration regime would not be too serious. Migration to and from the EU14 is pretty well in balance. There was a blip when Spain, Portugal and Greece joined, but the numbers have now declined to a mere 22,000 a year. In the longer term, we can expect migration to and from the 10 new EU members to come into balance as their economies approximate to ours. Long-term pressure on immigration will come from the third world, where populations are rapidly expanding and employment opportunities for the young are sadly lagging well behind those in the EU. One measure of that is that visa applications have increased by 50 per cent. in the past five years.

Any immigration system is only as good as its ability to remove. We now find that the international human rights framework, which was established half a century ago and was brought into domestic legislation by the Human Rights Act 1998 nearly 10 years ago, has many serious unintended consequences. For example, it is making it extremely difficult for the authorities to remove from Britain people who have no right to be here and who, frankly, are abusing the hospitality and good will of our country. My second suggestion, therefore, is that a fundamental review of our membership of the European Court of Human Rights must be part of a new approach to immigration control.

My third proposal concerns the entitlement of non-EU citizens to welfare benefits. Under the transitional arrangements for the accession of eight EU countries, the Government sharply curtailed access to the welfare state for the first 12 months, but that will fall by the wayside at the end of the seven-year transition period, if not before. However, I believe that we should adapt this principle for wider use. We should deny full benefits to anyone who has not become a British citizen, or who has not worked in the UK for five years and been granted indefinite leave to remain. In other words, to enjoy the full benefits of the welfare state, a migrant would have to contribute significantly to the welfare state before being entitled to all its benefits, and/or have shown a commitment to becoming a British citizen by learning English and passing the citizenship test. Such a regime would go some way toward defusing the very strong sense of unfairness felt by those who have paid into the system for many years, but seen others benefit more or less on arrival.

To sum up, we need a fundamental rethink of our immigration system. Muddling on as we are will only add to the pressures building up in our society. I have made three proposals: an annual limit to immigration close to the level of emigration, a fundamental review of our membership of the ECHR, and a restriction of welfare benefits for those who have not contributed for five years. Finally and very importantly, we need more of an effort in this House and more widely in Britain, and we need to have a cool, sustained and serious debate on immigration, which has been long-promised but is long overdue.

9.52 am

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on calling this debate. I am pleased that this Minister will be replying because he is by far and away the most impressive Minister on immigration, and shows all the signs of attempting to turn around this huge oil tanker, although those who navigate such ships tell me that it takes time.

I shall begin on a slightly discordant note. The debate on immigration is rated by constituents as one of the most important. And yet look! Although I am grateful that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex is being supported by three Back-Bench Conservative Members, no Liberal Democrat Member is here to support their spokesman, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg). I do not know whether the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian Lucas), will be frog-marched into contributing to this debate, but no other Labour Member, besides the Minister, is present. Yet this is, for our constituents, one of the key issues that we are facing, and they think that we should represent their views more adequately.

I disagree also with the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex on his very firmly fixing the culture of blame to the Government. I would throw the net wider, although he would reply, "Well, he would say that". However, I believe also that we are fighting, in the political classes, a frame of mind that is unwilling, perhaps, to suggest that it might have been mistaken in what it has prattled about for the last 30 years. Indeed, perhaps the Minister would take a message back to his Cabinet colleagues. In the statements of relief that the last bombing episode had not wrought the evil on innocent people that had been intended, Cabinet Ministers told us to be vigilant. The report back from my constituents in Birkenhead market was: "What a damned cheek that they should lecture us on vigilance!" If the political class had been a little more vigilant in the past, and responded to their regular doubts and worries about the level of immigration, we might not, they said, be listening to such statements from Cabinet Ministers. So a little less from the political leadership about those on the receiving end of that lack of vigilance from the political class would be much welcomed.

Bob Spink: While the right hon. Gentleman is talking about political leadership, there is the small matter of deportation, which relates to immigration control. I believe that he was in the Chamber when the Home Secretary told me that, over the last two years, only nine people had been deported from this country on national security grounds. Was the right hon. Gentleman astounded by that? Does he think that that shows a failure of political leadership, given that currently almost 2,000 people are under surveillance in this country for possible terrorist activity, and that so many leave our prisons each year?

Mr. Field: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that I was in the Chamber at that time, because I asked whether we would track those leaving this country to go to terror camps abroad, and prevent their re-emergence in this country. The Home Secretary's view was that the Government had not yet contemplated such a move, which I think suggested a lack of urgency that might haunt her as time goes on. But if I may, I shall return to that matter.

I am grateful, for another reason, to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex for calling this debate. I wanted to present the information that he did—I shall not repeat it—in a slightly different context. We need a debate on both our national identity and, linked to that in a horrible way, our national security. I represent a seat little affected by those early waves of Commonwealth immigration. However, it includes many vulnerable people, and many others who are not vulnerable, who feel that without any debate or consultation with them, what it means to be English and to have an English identity in this country is changing. As a political class we can of course pretend that that is not happening below the surface, but we must not be surprised if, at the end of the day, events overtake us the consequences of which might shock us. The charge against all of us, not only this one Government, is that we have remained so confident about our national identity that we feel that it does not need to be renewed.

That is the case on a macro level, but we have done the same on a micro level. We have taken it for granted that just because in the past this country was very successful in nurturing children, we do not really have to pay much attention to it in the future. Well, we jolly well need to pay attention to how we nurture children, so that they become first-class citizens and contribute to the community. Likewise, we need to think much more carefully about the very nature of Englishness or, as the Prime Minister, for obvious reasons, would prefer us to call it, "Britishness"—although most people are not fooled by that and insist on Englishness, because after all we are still the majority in this country, despite figures that we have heard.

My constituents are appalled by the way that we treat citizenship: our lack of regard, our failure to think that citizenship should be treasured and nurtured. They reject totally the dominant view among the political classes that have ruled this country for 30 or 40 years that citizenship is like a trip round the supermarket—the idea that we can pick up the bits that we want and reject those that we do not like. That is not to condemn any of those who have behaved in that way. The condemnation is against us, in that we could have acted otherwise but failed to do so. I am sometimes shocked when I hear colleagues criticising groups that have arrived here more recently for their behaviour. Given that in the past we did not care tuppence how they behaved, it seems a bit rich that we should now be getting upset about some of the ways that they present themselves visibly in our community. The debate is of course about numbers, but it is also about what it means to create and maintain a community. If the Government do not change track very smartly on this issue, the sense of national identity might be lost, and then we are in totally new territory. None of us knows what it will be like to try to govern, or what the consequences of failing to be able to govern will be.

I thought that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex was modest in the figures that he gave—they do not tally with the figures that I have tried to compute in this area—but he is right to say that we are at a loss to know the precise numbers of people coming and going. One would have thought that that would be a first

requirement of those who have a duty to defend our borders. The rate is certainly speeding up, as the hon. Gentleman said. In the last three years for which we have data, the number of people coming to this country is about 2 million and the number leaving is about 1 million. I do not subtract one from the other and say, "Oh, there is a net increase of only this sum." Those figures are changing the stock of people in this country. Therefore, one has to bear in mind both those forces.

In these circumstances, what might the Government do? I return to the intervention by the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink): we need to regain control over our borders on a much sharper timetable than the one that the Government have announced for action on this front. We should do so with the sense of urgency that most of our constituents have. I look forward very much to hearing what the Minister says on that.

I do not exclude, as the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex did in opening the debate, movements from eastern Europe. I beg him to look at those figures again and not merely to mock those clever people who told us that when we opened the borders only 13,000 people would come from Poland and other countries. Poland has an honourable history of supporting us in times of need and I am not one to disregard that lightly, but with all those who do not have to register for work because they are self-employed and those who are bringing families here, we may have had, from that first wave of immigration when we opened our borders, about 1 million people coming from eastern Europe. I do not believe that is sustainable, nor do I believe the line that the apologists trot out that most people are going home, because we now know that most people are not going home. Of course, it is a huge compliment to this country that people want to come here, want to stay and want to contribute. I do not doubt any of their motives or their good intent, but I return to the question whether it is sustainable at this level.

Of course the Government could say, as the hon. Gentleman did, that we signed treaties, but we signed treaties about the free movement of people in a single market when the countries with which we were signing those treaties had similar standards of living to our own. We have now extended our borders, for good reasons but also political reasons, and it is not sustainable to have those open borders within Europe when some countries will not begin to approach our current living standards until a time when all hon. Members who contribute to this debate have long since ceased to exist in this world. The Government have to begin a conversation with our partners in Europe about whether they think, along the same lines as some of us in this debate, that the future of the European Union is an unsure one if we continue blindly to turn our eyes away from what is now a mass movement of people within Europe, as well as what the hon. Gentleman talked about, which was people coming from beyond the European borders.

That is my first plea, which links to the point that in a sense the hon. Member for Castle Point allowed me to make as a result of his intervention. We need, as a matter of urgency, to be able to trace people from this country into Europe and from Europe to the terror training camps, which are largely but not exclusively in Pakistan. Not to do so now, given the number of warnings that we have had, will reflect—let me put it euphemistically—very badly on the Government who are in power. That is my second point.

My third proposal is that we should insist that anyone coming here should speak English; that should be one of the requirements. I say that because I believe that it is crucial that people participate and, unless we do that, we are allowing people to be subjected to all sorts of evil forces to which they should not be subjected. People who cannot speak English find it very difficult indeed to escape oppression once they are here if they are also restricted not by evil people, but by a different language.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I was waiting for the right hon. Gentleman to clarify what he meant by a requirement to speak English for those coming here. Would that cover people who came here temporarily as well, or is he talking only about those who seek to settle here permanently? If he is talking about the latter, I totally agree with him. I wonder whether it is realistic to suggest that anyone who comes through the terminals of Heathrow airport should speak English.

Mr. Field: No, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, there are different categories here and we do have a group of people who—let us put it kindly—come here for a temporary stay and decide that it is so nice that they want to stay longer than that. Of course we do not want to test people who come into Heathrow and are to leave in a few days' time, but insisting on an English language test would show how important our national identity is and is also important in terms of the way in which we wish to welcome people and our wish that they should be fully integrated into our community.

Fourthly, will the Government please become real about how immigration undermines other aspects of their policy? The hon. Member for Mid-Sussex touched on some of them. We all know that in our constituencies there are large numbers of people who, unless we radically change our approach to housing, will never, ever, ever have a decent home—and they scale down all the time what they mean by decent, given the terms of trade under which they have to barter. It is absurd for the Government to say that they are trying to increase significantly the amount of affordable housing for people here if we have an open-doors policy and are adding significantly to the number of people who, naturally, want to live in decent circumstances and whom we would wish to live in decent circumstances. There is clearly a conflict there.

There is also a conflict with the totally proper wish of the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and now Prime Minister to take this country's skills base upmarket. If only employers would behave differently. If there is an endless supply of cheap labour—although the labour may in the workers' own countries be deemed skilled—there is no incentive whatever to try to raise the skills base in this country and match that new skills base with an increase in the capital formation. If we do not do that, this country's long-term future is doomed. There is no way that most of our younger constituents will find work over the coming decades if we do not significantly raise our game, but there will be no pressure to do so if employers have an endless supply of willing and hard-working cheap labour.

[Mr. Frank Field]

My last proposal, which takes us back to one that has already been made, is that we should be much more serious about welfare, not because we want to crack down or be unpleasant to people, but because the feeling of having contributed to the building up of certain institutions and provisions and, therefore, the feeling of owning them are part of being English, Welsh or Scottish. We are undermining one of the cornerstones of our society by allowing Tom, Dick and Harry to qualify under certain conditions—perhaps for the best reasons in the world—when others believe that one should first make a significant contribution to the community and that they have done so either as individuals or through their families. Not requiring people to make a contribution strikes against other people's sense of fairness. In the long run, those with sharper elbows will not defend the institutions that are crucial to the poorest members of our society if they feel that those who come to this country are getting as good a deal as, or a better deal than, the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish people who have been resident here for a long time and who—either as individuals or through their families—have contributed to those institutions.

I am grateful that we have had this debate, but I end on the note on which I began—

Bob Spink: Before the right hon. Gentleman finishes, will he allow me to make one more point? I was waiting for him to raise one more issue, but he has not. Unless the Government and the House address the implications of immigration issues, we will see the rise of fundamentalist parties, which will fill the vacuum. *[Interruption.]* That would be an extremely bad thing, not only for our society, but for the excellent immigrants who come here.

Mr. Field: Clearly, the hon. Gentleman was being prompted, but he responded very well.

I end by saying that I am appalled that the Chamber is not so full of people demanding to speak that there is standing room only. One advantage of that would have been that we would more adequately have reflected our constituents' worries and concerns, but it would also have meant that I would have had to speak much more briefly.

10.12 am

Mr. Andrew Pelling (Croydon, Central) (Con): I, too, heartily congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on securing the debate. Migration is, of course, a sign of economic success. It is also of great benefit to migrants themselves, as a recent World Bank report underlined.

As a London Member of Parliament, it is important that I contribute to the debate because London receives more than double the total amount of inward migration into the rest of the UK. It is particularly important that I contribute because the Border and Immigration Agency and the Electric house reporting centre for migrants are based in my constituency. Indeed, 40 per cent. of my casework relates to migration, and I am extremely grateful for the Minister's assiduous responses to the cases that I raise with him.

It is important that Parliament should debate this issue. In other places, the approach has been weak and pusillanimous. Colleagues will know that I am also a member of the London assembly, and it is a great criticism of that organisation that it has felt unable during its seven years to conduct a proper investigation into what is such an important issue for London and that it has decided to have only a watching brief on it.

Migration and human trafficking are also important to me as a Croydon Member of Parliament, because Croydon Community Against Trafficking is a strong campaigner in my locality on the issues of human trafficking and the local sex industry, which is driven by human trafficking. The group has done good work to identify just how high a proportion of women in Croydon's brothels are trafficked from overseas, and the figure is, indeed, 84 per cent. It also does important campaigning to raise awareness of the issue with the police and other public bodies. In addition, it is strongly campaigning to encourage the *Croydon Advertiser* and the *Croydon Guardian* to remove adverts based on the sex industry and human trafficking. It is unacceptable that those newspaper groups should secure profits on the back of such activity.

Important points have been made in the debate about the implications of migration policy for housing and worklessness. Worklessness among London's indigenous population is an important issue. Where borders are relatively open in terms of migration, the combination of benefits payments and poor training among the indigenous population means that it is almost economically logical for others to be drawn into the London economy to provide the skills that are not available. That can lead to those in areas of great under-privilege becoming significantly resentful of the approach taken by those of us in the political classes, as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) stated, and there is a great danger that we will be unable to engage properly on this issue or to give voice to it.

As a candidate in the last general election, I referred to the London plan and the recognition that housing pressures exist as a result of migration. I was concerned that that should have resulted in a complaint by my political opponent and that I should be spoken to by the local police service about the matter. When authorities make such directions to prevent mainstream politicians from having a reasonable, studied and careful debate about migration, that is an invitation to electors to support parties of the far right. That is why it is so useful and such good news that my hon. Friend has secured this debate.

Obviously, it is important for us to work with our European partners to deal with migration. It is good news that the European Union tries to discourage migration from outside the EU by opening up our markets to those in, for example, the Maghreb. In that way, we are likely to be able to ensure that incentives to migrate to the EU are reduced. It is also good news that there are EU initiatives on education and work and on encouraging the return of illegal migrants to outside the EU. However, I am glad that the Government are sceptical about giving up unilateral control over our own borders.

It is also important to recognise the significance of English, which my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) raised in his intervention. There are real concerns about the effective integration of migrants into British society, given that support for

English language training is being reduced for speakers of other languages. Such reductions are entirely counterintuitive, although I understand just how strong the demands on the service are. None the less, those reductions are themselves a reflection of the way in which there has been a loss of control over the numbers coming into the UK.

I strongly agree that it is time for us to consider constructively reducing the flows of migrants into the United Kingdom. Perhaps what is happening is the result of economic success; but economies go up and down, and it is quite reasonable for us, in our national interest, to be able to feel that we have some control over the amount of immigration into our country, and that that should be in the interest of our constituents.

More than a third of the present population of London were born outside the United Kingdom. It strikes me that the Government should have a view on what the percentage should be: does the Minister take the view that it should be the majority? The question whether the majority of residents of our capital city should have been born outside the UK strikes me as a fundamental aspect of public policy. It is important for us to regain control over our borders and reduce the rate of migration into the United Kingdom.

10.21 am

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on securing the debate. He may be surprised to learn that I agree with quite a lot of his analysis, although I do not share some of his conclusions. To highlight the fact that there has been a quantitative shift in the scale of immigration into the United Kingdom, with massive knock-on effects on the public policy debate, seems to me to be stating the obvious. Other right hon. and hon. Members have claimed that the political class as a whole has been living in denial of that fact, and I certainly join them in that view and acknowledge that when the facts around us change as radically as they have done a political response is required.

I shall repeat some of the facts that underline my point: global migration has increased dramatically in the past 20 years and there are now 191 million people living in a country other than the one where they were born; 7.5 per cent. of the British population were born abroad; net immigration has risen exponentially since the mid-1990s to reach about 185,000 in 2005 alone, which is the equivalent of about 500 more people a day; we have heard figures suggesting that up to 600,000 workers have come from the new EU member states, although we do not yet know quite how many have returned; and just over 32 million overseas visitors came to Britain in the year to April 2007, which is twice as many as 20 years ago. Infamously, the Home Office has estimated that there are anything between 300,000 and about 600,000 irregular or illegal immigrants living in the United Kingdom. The sheer scale of what I have described is striking and new and has had a dramatic effect on public opinion. We know, from one opinion poll after another, that the salience of the issue of immigration is now far greater than it has been for a generation.

I accept, therefore, that a major public policy challenge exists. However, I do not share the three-point conclusions that the hon. Gentleman reached. I have never heard anyone explain—but perhaps the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleague will do so—how to turn immigration on and off like a tap and pull up the drawbridge for the nth new immigrant who arrives beyond the quotas unilaterally set by the Government of the day. I simply do not see how that is practicable. Equally, I understand that the perceived constraints placed by the European convention on human rights on the deportation of a very small number of individuals to countries where, let us remember, the relevant concern is that they will be tortured, is a raging preoccupation for many Conservative Members; however, given that the constraint applies, if at all, to a tiny handful of people, it is irrelevant to the issue of large-scale economic immigration to the United Kingdom.

There is a good and legitimate debate to be had about the restriction of benefits; as to some of the premises of that debate, about making distinctions between the benefits for those who have contributed to the system over a lifetime, and the benefits for those who have not, the issue may develop into how to determine the appropriate period of time to qualify a person for full benefits. It should be borne in mind—the Minister may be able to elaborate on this point—that qualification for or entitlement to benefits is already much more restricted than many people, I think, imagine, certainly for non-EU citizens.

Having said all that, it is worth recalling that there are still more British citizens living abroad than non-UK nationals living in this country. If people with second homes who spend a significant part of every year abroad are taken into account we are talking about nearly one in 10 of the British population living abroad permanently or for part of the time; it is a two-way process. One of the dangers of the kind of political debate that we could have about this subject, framed purely in terms of the threat that large-scale immigration poses, is that we may remain oblivious to the fact that British citizens benefit enormously from the mobility that now exists, particularly in the European Union. We would not want to deprive British citizens of that freedom, so we should not lightly deprive others of it.

Mr. Frank Field: The hon. Gentleman is noted for having an optimistic view of events; I have a slightly pessimistic one. Does he not also think that the growing number of people leaving these shores to live abroad are doing so because they are appalled by what is happening to their mother country?

Mr. Clegg: No. I do not share for a minute the idea that a Victor Meldrew-style disgust is leading to that outflow of people. It has been much to our credit that we are a people who have for decades—for centuries—travelled and lived abroad. We are an outward-looking, travelling and explorative nation, and that is a good thing. Perhaps issues such as climate weigh heavily with the large numbers of pensioners who seek sunnier climes in their retirement. I do not subscribe to the right hon. Gentleman's enormously pessimistic view, but I have sympathy with him as a sufferer from it.

Perhaps I may take up a specific point with the right hon. Gentleman. He talked, and I agree, about the need for a debate about what it is to be British, or, more

[Mr. Clegg]

specifically, English. I could not agree more and I think that the challenges posed by large-scale immigration also throw up important questions about identity and integration and the values around which identity and integration are organised. I still happen to think, however, that openness to the outside world, tolerance towards others, acceptance of diversity, and an acknowledgement of the economic benefits brought about by economic immigration are part and parcel of a liberal identity that I cherish. It would be a crying shame if in our response to the new facts we were to throw the baby out with the bath water and not acknowledge that a liberal attitude to immigration is integral to what it is to be British.

Mr. Field: Of course I accept what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but I want to probe further. Does he believe that that identity itself might lose out, given the current scale of immigration? Is it his view that we can and should do nothing to try to restrict it; that our means may be feeble but we should at least show the political will to do so; or that it is totally unimportant?

Mr. Clegg: No, I do not believe that it is a process of policy neglect or that the response should be a throwing up of the hands and to take a laissez-faire approach. I do not suggest that we should simply allow large-scale immigration to take its natural course in an unmanaged fashion—quite the reverse. If any kind of halting consensus is emerging in this political debate, it is that, given the sheer scale of inward immigration, we must ensure that it is managed. I freely acknowledge that unmanaged immigration can have negative consequences, not only for the immigrants, who may be subject to illegal trafficking, criminality and discrimination, but to the anxieties, fears and, sometimes, prejudices, of the host nation. That brings me to the latter part of my comments and some of my questions for the Minister. How should we manage the process and ensure that immigration on that scale is a positive and managed process and not an uncontrolled, unmanaged and negative process?

Mr. Field: I thought that we were agreeing, but then the hon. Gentleman tucked into his last sentence his acceptance of immigration on that scale. Does he believe that we should try to reduce the current scale of immigration or not?

Mr. Clegg: There are perfectly legitimate circumstances in which we should refuse to allow certain people into this country for stated reasons. If I am a pessimist, it is in this respect: I have not yet heard of a system that is sufficient in its watertight rigour to do what the hon. Gentleman suggests and somehow set an arbitrary limit and then pull up the drawbridge at the Dover coast. I challenge him to explain exactly how he would do that. We are dealing with a global phenomenon of a mass movement of people across borders, which is altogether more complex, but that process can be managed if we have an efficient, fair and effective system. My criticism of the Government is to ask why it has taken them 10 years to introduce a points-based system and the Border and Immigration Agency—steps that I welcome. Why do they propose not to reintroduce the exit controls that were abolished in 1994, so that we at least know who comes in and goes out, until 2014? That seems a lackadaisical approach.

Mr. Field: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clegg: May I finish these points before we descend into a bilateral debate?

Why do the Government still refuse to accept the case that has been made by both Opposition parties for a properly resourced and integrated border force? The Minister and I have argued across the Floor of the House many times about the virtues and vices of identity cards. Does he seriously believe that they will provide a panacea to all our ills when it comes to managing immigration? Does he accept that if there are, by his own estimation, up to 600,000 people living illegally in this country, even if we had the best controls and the tightest identity checks on the planet, we would risk driving an increasing number of people out of sight and out of mind altogether?

I come to a point that the hon. Gentleman made: if we are to manage the process properly, we need to plan for the effects of inward immigration. Much has rightly been said about the foot-dragging with which the Government have responded to the massive housing crisis, and I am curious to hear the Minister's responses to the points that have been put to him about whether the new Prime Minister's latest plans will be sufficient to deal with the long-term demand for housing.

I return to the legacy of the large numbers of people living invisibly and illegally in this country. What are we to do about them? The Conservative proposal that we should somehow deport those 600,000 people is utterly fanciful. Is it not time for us all to accept that as part of a more honest, candid and straightforward management of the process, we must find some way of creating a route, not an amnesty, by which earned regularisation is introduced? Will the Government consider urgently what local authorities tell us—that in areas with large numbers of new immigrants, the Government funding formula for local government simply does not reflect their particular needs? Indeed, there is a time lag of about three years between such demands being placed on local authorities and the resources being provided to them by the Government.

I know that others wish to speak, so I shall make my final points. The issue of how to promote integration as well as immigration is all important. I agree with much that has been said about the need to tighten the requirements on proficiency in the English language. As the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Pelling) said, it is clearly contradictory to advocate that at the same time as cutting resources for English language learning. It might be time to revisit the "Life in the United Kingdom" test that is applied to people who seek to settle permanently in this country. Perhaps it should be extended to those who apply for long-term visas. The test could be made more practical so that those people are given more practical guidance on how to live in this country rather than being stuffed full of historical facts that might not be relevant to their everyday needs.

Finally, will the Minister reconsider the way in which the money raised from work permit fees is used? Perhaps it could be recycled to provide training to

British workers who feel that their sectors are under particular pressure from an influx of workers from elsewhere. I understand that a UK work permit currently costs the employer £200 in comparison with the cost in the United States of just under $2,000. Does the Minister think that there is a case for increasing the cost of work permits, so that a fund can be created to retrain those who might be economically affected by the scale of inward economic immigration?

10.36 am

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) should be congratulated not only in the conventional manner on securing the debate, but on the tone in which he addressed the serious issues that he raised. Those few of us who are present agree on the importance of this issue and, I am sure, agree that mainstream politicians need to address it in a tone that is calm, moderate and fact-based. Two extremes too often intrude on this debate—hysteria, bordering on racism, and sentimentality—neither of which gives rise to good policy, so the tone is important, as is content.

My hon. Friend's remarks were full of interesting content, much of which I completely agreed with, and parts of which I did not. I shall address all those points, but first I shall address the comments by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) about the importance of the debate, on which he was half right. Where he was wrong gives rise to an important lesson. He was right to say that the issue is hugely important and that there is a feeling out there that mainstream politicians do not address it enough, but he was wrong to say that for a generation—I think he said 30 or 40 years—it has not been addressed as much as people would have liked. There have been periods in which immigration has been hugely salient as a political issue, of which now is one, and periods when it has not. It was hugely salient in the '60s and early '70s, but not in the '80s and '90s, because the general public thought that immigration was under control in those years and was therefore a problem at least temporarily parked if not solved. Therefore, people did not have the anxiety about it in the '80s and '90s that they had in the '50s, '60s and '70s and have now.

That brings me to my first point—numbers matter. One of the most absurd things that the Minister's predecessor did was to accuse me, in my early months of shadowing his job, of playing the numbers game. Immigration is essentially a numbers game; numbers absolutely matter in this field as much as they do in welfare and economic policy. That kind of unthinking response to the debate on immigration has given rise to a lack of public confidence. Therefore, Conservatives seek proper control of the numbers as the absolute basis for restoring public confidence in the immigration system. That confidence has been completely lost.

The Minister made a good point earlier this year when he said that immigration makes Britain richer, but that it has also unsettled the country. He went on to say:

> "The political risk for any government is that if you fail to solve this paradox you could lose your job."

My contention is that the Government have failed to solve the paradox, but the Minister is still in post. I am sure that delights him—at least it means that we have somebody sensible tackling this paradox.

I will now turn to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex. The rate of change matters. Changes in the global economy—or globalisation as we glibly call it—have had some effect, but what is often not addressed is how many of those changes will stay. There is an intellectual current growing that says that most of the people who are coming to the UK, particularly from other parts of the European Union, are coming for a short time. The truth is that we do not know whether that is the case.

The evidence is that an increasing proportion of those people are deciding to stay. In the early months of the arrival of those from the A8 countries, particularly from Poland, about 20 per cent. of them said that they intended to stay permanently. If the same question was asked now, the figure would have gone up to about 25 per cent. That is intuitively plausible; as people live here, they will form relationships, come to like this country and will say, "Perhaps I will spend much of my life here." We must presume that a smaller proportion will go home than the Government assumed.

We need to look at some of the knock-on effects. The head of the national organisation of Poles in this country has told me that it is now impossible to get a Polish plumber in Warsaw. There are now so many in western Europe that when someone calls for a plumber in Warsaw, they end up with a Romanian, Bulgarian or Ukrainian. Therefore, we must look at our wider obligations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex did not just talk about the issue—he gave policy suggestions. He talked about benefits. I will leave the Minister to answer that issue in detail. The important point is that the public at large have very little understanding of the difference between contributory and non-contributory benefits. If people think that large numbers are gaining access to benefits that they feel they receive because they have been contributing to them for many years, a sense of unfairness will arise. That in itself would be very damaging for community cohesion, so it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that that sense of unfairness is mitigated in every way possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex talked about the European Court of Human Rights. He will be aware, and I am happy to confirm, that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) has said that he seeks a reappraisal of human rights legislation. The Conservative party is considering whether a British Bill of Rights might be a more appropriate way to proceed in a world that has changed in the half a century since the ECHR was created. We seek no diminution in what all of us would recognise as human rights. We would like those rights set in a more appropriate context for a vastly different and fast-changing world in the 21st century.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) said he thought that that was irrelevant to mass immigration because it affected only a very few people. It may affect only a few people, but some of those people may be very important in the life of this country—they may be serious terrorists. Even if one person whom the British authorities regard as a threat to the safety of life in this country cannot be deported, that would cause a huge lack of confidence in the immigration system more widely and the system that

[Damian Green]

surrounds it. That is why the issue is important, even if the numbers affected are not very large.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex said that he effectively wanted to manage this down to zero net immigration, but I must part company with him as I do not see the magic in that. If the economy benefits from immigration, rationally we should seek a level of immigration that maximises the benefit. At the same time, we should recognise that there will be strains on infrastructure and so on—he mentioned that—and thus we should seek an optimal level. It is not clear that the optimal level will be zero every year. There may be perverse periods—for example, if the economy went into recession for several years—that might increase the amount of emigration. At such a stage, it would seem perverse if that in itself permitted a higher degree of immigration when the labour market would be least able to provide jobs for new immigrants.

Although I do not agree on the zero net figure, I agree with my hon. Friend that we need an explicit limit. He, like other hon. Members, will be aware that the Conservative party advocates an explicit limit. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam said that he does not see how that could work—I can suggest only that he gets out more, because it works in other countries. Many other countries have such a system and it works perfectly well. There is a greater level of public confidence in their immigration systems than exists in this country. Our proposition is that there should be an explicit limit every year, taking into account the social and cohesion factors, the ability of the public infrastructure to cope and the needs of the economy at the time.

We would expect the current limit to be substantially less than the present level of immigration, because we observe all the strains and stresses that have been mentioned today and see that in certain parts of the country the public infrastructure simply cannot cope. We advocate extending the Government's points-based system so that we are trying to accept only people who are economically beneficial. On top of that there needs to be an explicit limit, because without one the points-based system will be meaningless; it will not increase public confidence or do what is necessary to ensure the radical change that we need.

All the points that colleagues from all parties have made about better enforcement are true. I agree with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam that we need proper border police. As he knows, we have a commission examining that. It is chaired by one of the Government's own security advisers, so we hope that eventually we shall tease the Government on to our ground on that matter.

In conclusion, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex that there is a better way than the current system. It entails more control, better border policing and tighter criteria. It will mean not only a more manageable immigration system, but greater community cohesion, as the capacity to absorb new arrivals in this country is taken seriously for the first time. He will have to wait for its introduction, but I promise him that it will arrive one day.

10.48 am

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. Liam Byrne): This may be the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, Mr. Atkinson, and it is a privilege to do so. I echo the congratulations given by hon. Members from all parties to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on securing this debate. Its content and tenor illustrate that this House can debate this in an intellectually sensible and important way. I back his call for more of this kind of debate in the House. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) put it well: this is an extremely important matter for our constituents and it needs to be debated more. I understand that immigration is not on Steve Hilton's prescribed list of topics for general debate by Conservative Members and realise that that has led to a bit of a vacuum, so I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has sought to step into the breach. I want to sketch out a few points of agreement and a few points where a little more debate may be needed. On a large amount of the policy, there is now a degree of consensus that we have not had before..

I shall start by reflecting on numbers, because that is precisely where the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex started and it is the right place for the debate to begin. It is true that the level of immigration to this country has changed over the past 10 years, and that European economic area nationals have increased—there were around 145,000 in 2005. The number of work permit holders has doubled, rather than tripled, up to 137,000. The point is that underneath that movement of people there is a degree of consensus that is worth sketching out. We agree that we should phase out low-skilled migration from outside Europe. We have introduced controls on Bulgarian and Romanian nationals coming to this country, and for the lifetime of that policy we shall phase out low-skilled migration from outside Europe. That is a matter on which we agree.

There is now a degree of consensus on refugees. In 2005, the Conservative party said:

> "We will set an overall annual limit on the numbers coming to Britain, including a fixed quota for the number of asylum seekers we accept."

That would have involved renegotiation of the Geneva convention, and was an unfortunate policy. The hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) was intelligent and wise to reverse it on 29 December when he said in *The Guardian:*

> "We will be looking at that again, and seeing what controls on asylum seekers are needed."

There is a degree of consensus on the level of EU migration. It does not include my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, but the position that both sides of the House have settled on is that we should accept free movement of people inside Europe. When the free movement of persons directive was laid on 4 April 2006 and then translated into immigration regulations, no party prayed against it, which signalled a degree of consensus.

The hon. Member for Mid-Sussex referred to work permits. There has been an increase in the number issued, but 25 per cent. were for those in the health and medical services and 17 per cent. for IT workers. There is a sense that the increase in the number of work permits has been driven by changing patterns of

economic growth. When we tightened some of the rules on work permits, there was a debate because many people thought that that was wrong. The hon. Member for Ashford wrote to me on 12 June saying that he not only spoke against our changes to the highly skilled migrant programme, but voted against them.

Damian Green: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byrne: As a courtesy to other hon. Members, I will not give way because of the number of points to which I must respond.

There was one disappointment in what was otherwise an excellent peroration by the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex. He was absolutely right to put the debate in an historical context, but it was not set in the context of changes in the world today. That point was picked up by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg). When there are sharp bursts of increased independence, as during the past 200 years of economic change, there are big movements of people. That was true in the late 19th century and it has been true since the 1980s. The hon. Gentleman was right to point out that global migration has doubled since the 1960s. The annual rate of change began to increase sharply from the late 1980s but, crucially, it was at the beginning of the 1990s that, for the first time, the majority of global migrants moved to developed countries rather than to developing countries. That has affected not just the United Kingdom, but all industrial economies around the world.

Between 1990 and 2005, the United States gained 15 million migrants, and Spain and Germany both gained around 4 million migrants. That is in sharp contrast with the 1.6 migrants who have moved in and out of the UK. Italy's net immigration rate today is around three times higher than that in the UK. The pattern of the debate has changed over the past decade, but that is because the world is changing.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex for making, for the first time, some practical proposals for how an immigration limit could be introduced. That has been talked about on the Opposition Benches for some time and finally we have heard one practical way of doing that. There was a degree of support, and difference of opinion, in the Chamber this morning, but finally we have had a practical solution. I do not think the hon. Gentleman proposes a cap on the number of refugees as part of that limit, which is a change on the Conservative Benches. If the cap does not include EU migration, it may not be the cap that he thinks because around 48 per cent. of the UK's net migration is from within Europe. However, it was good to hear some practical proposals at last.

Our proposals are obviously different, and we are beginning the countdown to the points system, under which only people whom Britain needs will be able to come to work and study in this country. The system will be introduced in the new year, but with any new points system the important question is, "How many points should someone need to be able to work and study in the UK?" I have said repeatedly that we need a far more open and intelligent debate about what immigration is good for Britain and what is not. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead that the media must be part of that debate. I am sure that many hon. Members have had debates with colleagues in the media and—dare I say it?—the BBC where there is a sense that the matter is difficult to talk about and that it would be better not to. That attitude must go, and we must debate the matter more openly. It is not racist to talk about immigration, because this is the real world.

When we set the number of points that people need to come to Britain, we should have a debate that includes a much more open discussion of the evidence, which is why we propose to set up the migration advisory committee. It will be in place at the end of the year, and will advise transparently on where immigration is needed in the economy, and where it is not needed. Alongside that, it is not sufficient to set immigration policy simply with an eye on the economy. We must consider what is going on in Britain as a whole, and we are establishing the migration impact forum to take account of the wider evidence of social and other impacts of immigration on British life before setting the points threshold. I am grateful to members of the forum, which met for the first time a few weeks ago and will meet again to begin discussion in earnest after the recess.

When that policy is set, it will be critical that it is enforced effectively. I reject the calls of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam for regularisation, which would be an amnesty in any other name and would put illegal immigrants at the front of the jobs queue when they should leave the country. It would send the wrong signal, and we should reject it.

We have set out measures with which to increase enforcement of the rules. That includes establishing stronger border controls not just in this country, but abroad to keep the problem of illegal immigration as far from our shores as possible. That is why we are introducing systems that will track people in and out. We shall count the majority of passengers in and out by 2009, but the same systems will allow us to increase screening of migrants before they get on a plane, train or boat and before they come anywhere near our shores.

The technology that we have put in place is already beginning to work. We have made progress with biometric visas, and have already found 4,000 people who had applied for a visa to come to Britain but who were misleading us about their identity. Passenger screening systems have found around 1,000 people who were subsequently arrested at airports. That sort of technology will be vital in strengthening future border security. It must be used alongside the new powers in the UK Borders Bill which will be important in strengthening future enforcement.

I want to reflect on Britishness. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead and the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex that we must have that debate in earnest in the months to come. There must be a stronger relationship between what new citizens get and what they give. Exploring whether English should be required before permanent entry is important, and I hope that when we publish that consultation it will receive wide support.

Epilepsy Services

11 am

Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley) (Lab): I am pleased to have obtained this debate, which is about epilepsy services and the all-party group on epilepsy's report entitled, "Wasted Money, Wasted Lives". It is a hard-hitting report about the human and economic costs of epilepsy in England today, and in undertaking it the all-party group was supported by the Joint Epilepsy Council of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The report found that people with epilepsy are being left behind by society and by a system that has consistently failed them, despite the development of effective treatments in recent years. Some 69,000 people live with unnecessary seizures, while 74,000 people take drugs that they do not need. The regularity of avoidable deaths, at almost 400 a year, is shocking. In addition, the number of people who experience seizures unnecessarily and the number taking anti-epileptic drugs for which they have no need, is an issue that demands recognition as a national scandal.

The money wasted in delivering inadequate services is almost as appalling as the unnecessary deaths and the damage to quality of life that people with epilepsy experience. The all-party group gathered evidence to provide a realistic picture of epilepsy services, and it highlighted problems caused by poor service provision. The written and oral evidence from patients and their families highlights the challenges of life with the condition—and in some cases, death.

During our inquiry, it became increasingly clear that even in today's world of competing health interests, the case for improving epilepsy services is overwhelming. Government guidelines for major changes to the treatment of epilepsy exist, but without targets or powers they are little more than wish lists, and of little use to patients who face critical failure.

The all-party group calls on the Government to accept responsibility for the shortfall in services, and to ensure that health care providers implement guidelines. It also urges the Government to address work force shortages by increasing as a matter of urgency the number of doctors with a special interest in epilepsy. The group invites the Health Select Committee to drive progress by examining the provision of health services for people with epilepsy in England, and looks to the Government to account for the decades of under-investment in this neglected area.

Epilepsy, which is the most common serious neurological condition, affecting about 382,000 people in England, is defined as a tendency to have recurrent seizures. A seizure is caused by a sudden burst of excess electrical activity in the brain, which causes a temporary disruption in the messages passing between the brain cells. Epilepsy is not a single condition; there are about 30 different epileptic syndromes and more than 38 different types of seizure. A person may have more than one type, and epilepsy can affect anyone at any age from any walk of life. Every year 990 people in England die from epilepsy-related causes, of whom about 365 are young adults and children.

Many people are wrongly diagnosed with epilepsy, and many have been diagnosed with the wrong type of epilepsy. Misdiagnosis rates in England are shocking, standing at between 20 and 30 per cent. An unknown number of people also experience misdiagnosis whereby they have epilepsy, but it is diagnosed as something else. Assuming a misdiagnosis figure of 23 per cent., that means that in England alone, about 74,000 people who do not have the condition are diagnosed with it and receive treatment for it. The Joint Epilepsy Council, in its recently published manifesto for epilepsy, shows how improvements in epilepsy care in England could realise estimated savings of £134 million a year in the annual cost of epilepsy misdiagnosis, based on figures from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

The medical cost alone of the unnecessary treatment of people who do not have epilepsy, and of the wrong treatment of people who have been diagnosed with the wrong kind of epilepsy in England, is estimated to be £22.5 million a year. That includes neither the economic cost nor the cost in lost opportunities to people who, because of misdiagnosis or mistreatment, could be in work but are not. When those costs are included, the estimated total cost of misdiagnosis in England rises to £134 million a year.

Some 70 per cent. of the population with epilepsy in the UK could be seizure-free with optimal treatment.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Lady, first, for securing the debate, and secondly, for letting me intervene briefly, because as she knows, the National Society for Epilepsy has its headquarters in my constituency. Does she agree that it is important that centres such as the NSE centre in the Chalfonts—and particularly its assessment centre, which is so successful in helping diagnose patients' underlying problems—continue to operate? Does she also agree that an increase in resources, wherever the financial support comes from, is absolutely essential to reduce the wastage of lives, money and time, which is caused by not having the correct facilities to diagnose and support such patients?

Chris McCafferty: The hon. Lady makes some valid and crucial points, and I agree with her entirely. All her points are reflected strongly in the report. Many such young people find that they have no future—their lives are wasted simply because the initial diagnosis is incorrect, or they are not diagnosed correctly at all. The point about the economic cost—the cost to the health service, and the cost in benefit terms of wasted opportunities and wasted lives—is clear.

As I said, 70 per cent. of the UK population with epilepsy could be seizure-free with optimal treatment. However, only 52 per cent. are, which means that 69,000 people in the UK who experience seizures could in fact be seizure-free. The human cost of those failings, as the hon. Lady has pointed out, is huge—for the individuals concerned, for their families, and indeed for society. Not only do they receive treatment for a condition that they do not have, but their true condition is not treated.

The NICE guidelines on epilepsy recommend that individuals requiring an MRI scan should have the test performed soon. The guideline development group subsequently decided that "soon" meant being seen within four weeks. In a recent survey by Epilepsy Action, only 26 per cent. of the 185 respondents who

had undergone an MRI scan within the past two years said that they had undergone it within four weeks.

Surgery should also be made available for all people with epilepsy for whom it is indicated. There is a clear saving when we take into account the alternative of expensive lifetime medication and occasional hospitalisation—and, of course, a health benefit to the individual. Patients who are successfully treated also have better employment prospects. They are less dependent, and the high initial expenditure on epilepsy surgery would result in long-term cost savings.

In recent years there has been an increase in reported epilepsy deaths, the majority of which have involved SUDEP—sudden unexpected death in epilepsy. SUDEP deaths are usually referred to coroners, as they require specialist investigation. I have a particular interest in the draft Coroners Bill, because Harold Shipman practised in my constituency. I have come to realise that the lack of standardisation and quality assurance in post-mortem investigations and certification of SUDEP deaths is a key barrier to the implementation of recognised prevention strategies.

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and apologise for not being able to stay for all of it. On identifying and investigating SUDEP deaths, is it not also a problem that coroners are at the mercy of local authorities in terms of the resources at their disposal? A few months ago, the all-party group heard from coroner Mary Hassall about the often grossly inadequate accommodation and staffing with which coroners must contend. It seriously compromises their ability to respond to SUDEP cases and to meet the needs of bereaved families seeking an explanation for a sudden and tragic death.

Chris McCafferty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—there are important and serious issues concerning the coroner service. I know that he welcomes, as do I, the draft Coroners Bill, which allows for a proper full-time professional service. That will make a great difference to any family dealing with a sudden or suspicious death. My hon. Friend is also right to refer to families, because another issue that needs to be addressed is the non-implementation of NICE guidelines for health professionals on communicating essential information about SUDEP and referring families affected by it to SUDEP support services.

The NICE clinical guidelines note that all adults and children with a recent onset suspected seizure should be seen by a specialist within two weeks. Generally, such specialists are adult or paediatric neurologists, but they also include neuropsychiatrists, learning disability or other specialists, and occasionally even general practitioners. An epilepsy services survey this year by Epilepsy Action suggested that only 14 per cent. of people with a recent onset suspected seizure who were referred to a specialist saw one within two weeks. Access to specialist neurologists is too limited, and a postcode lottery applies to access to neurological services.

England still has one of the lowest numbers of neurologists of any European country. The Royal College of Physicians has called for a target of 909 whole-time equivalents in the UK by 2012. In addition, the Joint Epilepsy Council believes that GPs with a special interest in epilepsy are key in delivering services closer to patients' homes and are a vital link between primary and secondary care. It is clear that such professionals, who are easier for patients to access and do not have long waiting lists, can play an important role, specifically in making accurate diagnoses and performing effective annual reviews, as recommended in the NICE guidelines.

Epilepsy specialist nurses are also a crucial source of care, support and advice for patients with epilepsy. They enable many to manage their epilepsy effectively and remain independent in the community. Their vital role has often been recognised by the Government, including in recent NICE clinical guidance on the diagnosis and management of epilepsy, which stated:

"Epilepsy specialist nurses should be an integral part of the network of care of individuals with epilepsy."

However, despite the chronic shortage of ESNs in Britain, recent reports suggest that the current work force is under threat. The JEC feels that it is now being forced to defend the status quo, rather than focusing on expanding the excellent services that ESNs provide. I hope that the Minister will clarify the position.

There are approximately 152 ESNs in England, and epilepsy organisations have long campaigned to increase that number to about 920. Epilepsy Action also recommends that ESNs have a case load of no more than 250 patients with active epilepsy. However, the Government have made it clear that decisions affecting ESN services are made by local health trusts, and that they cannot intervene. The JEC believes that they should do more to prevent local health trusts from seeing ESNs as soft targets when seeking to balance budgets. I welcome the recent dialogue on specialist nursing between voluntary organisations and the then Minister with responsibility for long-term conditions, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis). I look forward to the draft guidance on specialist nurses that will be published in early 2008.

Ready access to high-quality, responsive primary and secondary care is crucial for those with epilepsy and would meet the needs of most. However, only 52 per cent. of people with epilepsy have their seizures successfully controlled. The 48 per cent. with seizures not controlled by anti-epileptic drugs should be referred to tertiary care clinics. Unfortunately, there is some indication that it is usually well-educated, assertive and articulate individuals and families who succeed in gaining access to tertiary services. There is concern that many with epilepsy who are less articulate are dissuaded or refused, or give up the struggle with the system, and are therefore denied the opportunity for optimal advice and care.

Between 2002 and 2006, the Government published five reports on the provision of epilepsy care—including the 2002 chief medical officer's report—along with the 2002 national sentinel audit of epilepsy-related death, the 2003 action plan for epilepsy, the 2004 NICE clinical guidelines on epilepsy, the 2005 national service framework on long-term neurological conditions, and the 2006 White Paper "Our Health, Our Care, Our Say". All drew much the same conclusions about fragmented and poorly co-ordinated service provision, but provision of services in England for people with epilepsy has not substantially improved over the years. However, the

[Chris McCafferty]

all-party group recognises that the Department of Health has taken initiatives regarding the care of people with epilepsy.

The NICE guidelines were described as groundbreaking in setting standards. However, their effective implementation and that of the action plan remain in question. The all-party group believes that a lack of funding is a significant reason for the serious gaps in service provision for people with epilepsy. Funding for epilepsy is low compared with funding for other conditions affecting similar numbers of people, such as insulin-dependent diabetes. Funding must be urgently rethought to address the gap in service provision.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the need to improve services for people with epilepsy and the huge problem of misdiagnosis. Is there not also another problem to address—the prejudice that still exists against people with epilepsy, and the misunderstanding of the condition among the general public and employers?

Chris McCafferty: My hon. Friend makes an important point. A great deal of prejudice and a lack of understanding still surround the lives of people with epilepsy. Although we are politely using the word "seizures" in this debate, the general public normally refer to them as fits. It is not a pleasant description, but in people's minds, somebody having an epileptic fit falls down in the street and jerks about, and lots of people just walk past or turn away, not wanting to face it. We should be talking about education and understanding. One of the most important points about the integration, where possible, of disabled children into mainstream schools is that young people grow up understanding the limitations and strengths of their colleagues.

A group of young epileptics in my constituency—in my home town of Hebden Bridge—now have a social group, and they see part of their role as ensuring that people in the town understand what epilepsy is. Of course, not all epileptics have grand mal seizures; some have small seizures that most ordinary people would not even notice.

Epilepsy organisations have pointed out that primary care trusts often seem powerless or unwilling to implement improvements. The reasons given for non-inclusion in local delivery plans were that national targets took priority and left insufficient funding to put in place the necessary resources to enable the trusts and general practices to implement the NICE guidelines. Yes, serious investment of an estimated £150 million is required. However, in real terms that is only £340 per person with epilepsy, which is a small price to pay for their quality of life.

In conclusion, I quickly remind the Minister of the report's key recommendations: that the Government should urgently put in place a programme to increase the number of neurologists and other relevant clinicians to levels recommended by the Royal College of General Practitioners; that the Healthcare Commission should carry out as a matter of urgency an improvement review to assess formally the provision of epilepsy services in individual health care organisations; and that an action plan to improve services should be developed.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): One issue that concerns me is the Prison Service. Much as I agree with the Government's reforms, which have taken responsibility for prisoner health from the Prison Service and given it to the NHS, there is now an issue of confidentiality. It is quite likely that a prisoner's epilepsy would not be known to the prison authorities. That could be worrying, because when someone has a seizure, instant action is important. Will my hon. Friend say something about that? Like me, she will be concerned about how the information is passed over. Those who have to care for such individuals should have prior knowledge of their conditions.

Chris McCafferty: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That balance between confidentiality and ensuring proper care for people with a health problem—be it epilepsy or anything else—is well known to all Members of Parliament, and it is a difficult balance to strike. Obviously, confidentiality is important to those in prison. One of the report's further recommendations is that the Health Committee should consider an inquiry into the provision of health services for people with epilepsy in England. I would like such an inquiry to include the important issue of the provision of services for prisoners with epilepsy.

The last key recommendation is that the Government should accept that for many decades, there has been considerable under-investment in what is a much-neglected condition, and that it is time for the Department of Health to put right the wrongs of the past.

11.24 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am grateful for being allowed to speak briefly in this debate. I had not intended to do so, but I am so pleased with the way that the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty) has introduced it, and particularly with the report prepared by the all-party epilepsy group, that I should like to speak briefly in the hope that I can contribute to the debate. Sadly, I shall not be able to remain until the end, and I apologise to other Members and the Minister for that; it is due not to impoliteness, but to pressure of timetable.

As I said in my earlier intervention, the National Society for Epilepsy is based in Chalfont St. Peter in my constituency. I immediately issue an invitation—on behalf of Graham Faulkner and everybody else, I am sure—to anybody with an interest in the issues to visit and see the great work carried out by Mr. Faulkner and his dedicated team of professionals.

The society has been called a colony in the past; it has been operating for more than 100 years and is a site dedicated to people suffering from epilepsy. It provides not only the research and assessment facilities that I referred to, but specialist residential care for those who require it.

As the Minister will appreciate, this is a Cinderella issue. The hon. Member for Calder Valley alluded to that, as did the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) in her intervention—*[Interruption.]* I apologise; I meant the intervention made by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon).

Mrs. Moon: I do not speak for the Liberal Democrats.

Mrs. Gillan: I understand that; my eyesight must be worse than I thought.

I understand that there is real ignorance among not only the general public and employers, but the medical profession. That is reflected in the report. Our residential care takes place not only on the NSE site, but in supported units in the community. That is important, as people suffering from severe epilepsy can be rehabilitated and introduced into the community. That is an important part of the work.

Obviously, the research unit is state-of-the-art and works with many distinguished scientists from around the country. One particularly impressive aspect of the NSE is the monitoring suites, which have state-of-the-art facilities for observing people continuously so that if they have an epileptic fit, they are looked at in a real-time situation. That gives those involved in the diagnosis a good chance of getting to the bottom of the problem.

It has always struck me that people come to the NSE's assessment unit, with their families, from all over the country. Those people are often confused and worried about their condition. They stay for many weeks; the assessment is long-term in some instances. When they know that the medics have got to the bottom of their condition and that they will receive the correct treatment, their relief can be seen.

The hon. Member for Calder Valley laid out the facts and figures well, and they are in the report for the Minister to look at. Is it not a crying shame that nearly 1,000 people a year die from epilepsy? More than 360 are young adults and children—what a waste of our society's future. Some 400 of the 1,000 deaths are considered to be unavoidable.

The report addresses not only the ignorance of the condition, but the inadequacy of provision and training. It is important that a Government concerned with the health of our whole society should examine the issue of epilepsy and address the concerns raised in the report. With certain adjustments of approach, we could certainly move to better outcomes on epilepsy. Misdiagnosis, work force issues, funding, employment, the stigma and the issues of residential care are all addressed in the report, but, as the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned prisoners, I would particularly like to take up that point. The Minister, with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, needs to address the treatment of prisoners who ostensibly have epilepsy. Some 62 per cent. of diagnoses of prisoners with epilepsy were not made by epilepsy specialists and, in addition, 53.8 per cent. of those prisoners diagnosed as having epilepsy had not had a medical review for 12 months.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): Does the hon. Lady have any information about the time scale of those figures? Responsibility for prison health passed over from the Home Office to the health service and local primary care trusts two or three years ago, I understand. We might be looking at two different pictures.

Mrs. Gillan: I must refer the hon. Lady to the report, if she has read it. I appreciate that responsibility for health passed over to the PCTs. Once again, we are seeing statistics that show that prisoners are not being followed up for a period of 12 months, and that more than 60 per cent. of those who are taking anti-epileptic drugs require a change in those drugs while none of the prisoners who need such a change have had that opportunity or been fully informed about their condition. I urge the Minister to consider that in her Department and with the Ministry of Justice, because it could impact on the access of prisoners to suitable health care, as they cannot readily walk out and consult a doctor or a nurse.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): That point highlights another subject that was touched on by the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty). So often, in the prison population in particular, those who suffer from epilepsy of whatever degree are labelled as having a mental health condition. That is often part of the missed diagnoses, let alone the misdiagnoses. I am anxious, as part of the liaison between the Department of Health and the Ministry of Justice, that there should be a much greater emphasis on considering the condition on its own merits rather than as a part of mental health, which, of course, is one of the main areas of concern within the prison population.

Mrs. Gillan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have alluded to the fact that epilepsy is often associated with other complex conditions, and that is no more the case than among some of the individuals who are detained at Her Majesty's pleasure in some of our prison establishments. I am particularly annoyed because, despite the fact that there are NICE guidelines that cover the subject, I feel from the information that was given to the all-party group that those guidelines are not being strictly implemented. I encourage the Minister to consider that.

If we want successfully to reintegrate former prisoners into our society, adequately treating and informing them, as well as allowing them access to medical services, is even more important. Those circumstances might well be linked to the pattern of offending.

I am delighted that the debate has been brought to the forefront. The area is deserted, but I hope that the Minister, whom I welcome to her role, will take a particular interest in it. If I or any of my hon. Friends can give her any help in the future to ensure that this area of our medical and community life is improved for a large number of people, I would be the first to offer that assistance.

11.33 am

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty) on securing the debate. The all-party group on epilepsy's report, which prompted the debate, is welcome because it was apparent while researching for today's debate that there is a dearth of information about patient experience in epilepsy.

I want to pick up on the point about discrimination made by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon). Unfortunately, epilepsy is one of those conditions that people often keep to themselves unless they have to tell their workmates. As Members of Parliament we are lobbied about access to all sorts of services, but I cannot recall being lobbied about access to epilepsy services on any occasion. It is clear from the report that

[Sandra Gidley]

there are significant problems. I hope that the groups that might read the debate in *Hansard* will give some thought not only to how they can provide support for the patients who join them, but to how they can help those patients lobby. One thing that I have learned in this place is that the more people who lobby MPs on a particular subject, the more it is highlighted in Parliament. Sadly, that fact is probably reflected in the attendance here today.

Mr. Drew: There is a particular problem regarding the families of those who suffer from epilepsy explaining the situation to their friends. I have met the group that meets regularly in Gloucester, and it is difficult to explain what having a family member with epilepsy involves. There is a general view that we must do much more on the education front to allow those people some dignity in their lives. The patient matters, but so does their family.

Sandra Gidley: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I used to work with someone with epilepsy and at the outset, she said, "If I fall over, you do not put a spoon in my mouth. This is what you do." She debunked the myths straight away, and we were not frightened of the condition and learned to cope with it. Sadly, she was the victim of an unexplained death as a result of epilepsy. Such deaths impact on families in all sorts of ways, too. The family found it difficult to cope with the unexplained death and had relatively little support and help afterwards. That was a few years ago, and I believe that more support is available now.

Mrs. Moon: I apologise because I, too, cannot stay for the whole debate. I was lobbied the week before last by a young girl of 17, whom I met at an event in my constituency and who was very distressed because she had just been diagnosed, albeit pro tem, by her GP as having epilepsy and needing to see a specialist and an MRI scan. The waiting time was hell, creating much anxiety and fear in the family. Living with that anxiety and fear and not knowing the long-term consequences often makes it difficult for people to tell others. They do not know what the consequences will be; all they know is that it feels like a huge sentence. It is difficult to articulate their fears alongside what should be done if they have a seizure.

Sandra Gidley: The hon. Lady has admirably highlighted the need for more information, not just once a firm diagnosis has been made but right at the beginning, so that the period of waiting and anxiety can be minimised. We can never get rid of it completely, but the more information, the better, and such information is not always readily available at the right source.

The NICE guidelines issued in October 2004 covered diagnosis, investigation, classification and treatment. Guidelines were also produced specifically for women—because of the issue of their taking medication in pregnancy—for children and young people, and for older people, who have slightly different needs. The guidelines are frequently not fully adopted. There is a problem with NICE guidelines in general, because in many areas of medicine they have no clout. There is no compulsion to adopt them, and although one would hope that PCTs want to optimise best practice, the financial situation often works against service change in the short term. As the hon. Member for Calder Valley highlighted, there are savings to be made by doing things properly, and the money saved can be reinvested in the service, so I do not want to get too hung up on the financial aspects.

As has been mentioned, there have been problems with referrals after diagnosis. The NICE standard states:

> "Any person who has had a possible seizure should be seen within two weeks by a specialist medical practitioner with training and expertise in epilepsy."

It goes on to state that tests such as electroencephalograms, or EEGs, and MRIs should be available within four weeks of a specialist asking for them. The all-party group's report mentioned referral, and funding panels deciding who is referred. If the guideline is that anybody who has had a possible seizure should be referred within two weeks, presumably the GP, who knows the patient best, makes that decision. As we have heard, GPs frequently miss the first seizures. I fail to see how a GP can suspect something, and somebody else then second-guess their decision and provide a further filter. Will the Minister look into that, so that we can be confident that everything is being done in all PCTs to ensure that the guideline is being met?

The report highlights particular problems with access to diagnostic tests, and the case of someone who had to wait two years. Although when we write such reports we always love to find the worst possible case, so that we can say, "Isn't that terrible?", the wider statistics bear some consideration. A recent survey by Epilepsy Action showed that only 26 per cent. of the 185 respondents who needed MRI scans had them within four weeks. Will the Minister outline how this issue will fit into the 18-week patient pathway, which is the centre of attention at the moment?

The survey by Epilepsy Action also pointed out that only 60 per cent. of those affected visited their GPs after their first suspected seizure, which brings us back to the issue of public education and raising awareness of the problem. Only 60 per cent. were referred to a specialist straight away, 29 per cent. were referred after a period of time, and 22 per cent. were not referred at all. That suggests a gap in the knowledge of some GPs. It may just be a lack of awareness of the NICE guidelines, but it may be something more fundamental. Only 27 per cent. were referred to an epilepsy specialist, while 53 per cent. saw a general neurologist and 22 per cent. another consultant. Some 50 per cent. of respondents waited longer than eight weeks for a first appointment with a neurologist or other epilepsy specialist.

The problems of accessing good treatment may have more serious knock-on effects. We have heard that, each year, approximately 990 people die of epilepsy-related causes, of whom 365 are young adults and children. More worryingly, the 2002 national audit of epilepsy-related deaths concluded that 39 per cent. of adult deaths and 59 per cent. of child deaths were considered potentially or probably avoidable. That is about 400 deaths a year that could be avoided. I am not clear about how they could be prevented or reduced, but better information would be helpful. The report cites the case of a family who had not realised the full

impact of epilepsy. There is a hint that they hoped that it would go away, or that they wanted to minimise it. Information for parents in particular is vital, so that they can come to terms with their child's condition and help them to manage it.

On treatment, it was interesting to see that the quality and outcomes framework did not necessarily equate to the Government's guidelines on best practice. Dr. Smithson stated that it

"measures the basic, not the best care."

He stressed the need for information, support and empowerment for patients to self-manage their conditions.

One thing in the report caused me a little alarm, and here, I declare an interest as a pharmacist who is still on the register. It states:

"We understand that some pharmacists are now saying they can do an epilepsy medicines review in a chemist's shop."

They are called pharmacies nowadays, but I shall leave that point. It continues:

"That proposition would reduce, not improve, the standard of annual reviews."

That completely misses the point. I am sorry to pick up on a part of the report that I disagree with, but "medicines use" reviews are intended to help patients get the best use out of their medicines. As has been mentioned, polypharmacy is often used, as people often have other long-term conditions. The reviews are about working with the patient to ensure such simple measures as drugs being taken at the right time and in the right combinations, so that they have the optimum effect and benefit. Any changes recommended are automatically referred back to the GP, who, if he is doing his job properly, should be able to use the information in an annual review. The two elements are not mutually exclusive.

By making better use of what is available on the high street—the one thing that we can be certain of is that people have to go to the pharmacy for their medication—a source of help and advice is provided. The passage of the report to which I referred was a disappointing element of it, but I hope that it was just down to a misunderstanding, and that the professions can work together across boundaries to do all that they can for patients.

There are a number of work force issues to consider. England has one of the lowest numbers of neurologists in Europe. France has three times as many by proportion and Italy 14 times as many, which I find staggering. The Royal College of Physicians has estimated that

"to provide comprehensive neurological care, including the care of the acutely ill neurological patient, one whole time equivalent consultant neurologist is required for 40,000 population. This model demands 1,250 NHS neurologists, 175 centre-based neurologists and 78 academic neurologists, which gives a total of approximately 1,400 nationally."

It conceded that that target is perhaps unrealistic in the short term and called for a target of 909 whole-time equivalents across the UK by 2012. Will the Minister elaborate on what is being done to achieve that target?

Epilepsy nurses are an integral part of the NICE guidelines. Many patients find it particularly helpful to talk to a specialist nurse, because it is not daunting and is often done in an informal setting. They often feel that they can ask the silly questions that they cannot ask a doctor. There are only 152 epilepsy nurses, and we need to reach a target of about 920 before there will be a proper network of nurses who can help deliver the guidelines.

It is clear that an awful lot needs to be done. We are talking about a group of patients who are shy in coming forward, but who deserve help and support. For many, epilepsy is a condition to be frightened of, as was said earlier, but with the right information, support and treatment, many can live with it comfortably. At the moment, we are not helping enough people to achieve that.

11.49 am

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Chris McCafferty) on securing this important and timely debate. I am glad to acknowledge and, indeed, pay tribute to the work of the Joint Epilepsy Council and of the all-party group on epilepsy, particularly its recent report "The human and economic cost of epilepsy in England", which has underpinned much of our debate today.

The noble Earl Howe, who is a fellow Conservative shadow Health Minister, is a member of that group, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), whom we heard from earlier, is an active vice-chairman. My right hon. Friend, the Leader of the official Opposition, is the secretary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Hurd) on holding the Government to account over the cuts and postcode lottery in services for epilepsy, and for his part in bringing the report together.

I also pay tribute to all the organisations involved in supporting people with epilepsy and their families. Many of those organisations are members of the Joint Epilepsy Council. One such organisation is the National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy, which is based in Lingfield. It does sterling work under the excellent leadership of Professor Brian Neville. Another is the National Society for Epilepsy. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham ably described its services, which are headquartered in the Chalfonts and are under the leadership of Graham Faulkner and his team. I dare say that we are all tempted to try to visit the society, as she so kindly extended an invitation.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the new Minister. This is the first time that we have met in this debating Chamber, although we met briefly on the Floor of the House. She should be congratulated on her new appointment. With her past experience, I am sure that she will be able to help us with many of the issues.

As we discussed earlier, this is a health issue. Epilepsy is a condition but it is not even necessarily a long-term condition. It is not a mental health matter, although clearly it involves mental health considerations, and it is important to stress that those who suffer from epilepsy should not be regarded as being part of the disabled and disability agenda.

Above all, as the hon. Member for Calder Valley rightly said, there is a general problem in society in respect of epilepsy. Going back many years, there has always been a lack of understanding in the broad society about it. As the son of a nurse, I certainly remember being taught by my mother not to be frightened

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

of people who have a seizure in the street, but I felt that I was being taught something exceptional and unusual. Also, my wife is a nurse. It is all very well if one understands the condition, but, usually, the fears of others drive the stigma and the lack of understanding that is as much of a battle to overcome as is the need to focus on the best help for those who suffer from the condition.

Behind the widely reported headlines that almost half of the 990 epilepsy-linked deaths in England each year are avoidable, that 70,000 patients do not get the drugs that they need, and that the misdiagnosis of patients is costing £134 million annually, the report is indeed hard-hitting. It is extremely thorough in its assessment of the situation and in its recommendations for action. It makes clear the Government's failure to make the provision of epilepsy services enough of a priority.

The report notes guidelines, audits and reports published in each year since 2001. In 2001, the chief medical officer highlighted

"the serious and long-standing weakness in the standard of care"

for epilepsy, and in 2002 the national audit of epilepsy-related deaths showed that

"39% of adult deaths and 59% of deaths in children were considered to have been potentially or probably avoidable".

In 2005, there were 990 deaths from epilepsy, of which 400 may have been avoidable.

The Government's response was the action plan for epilepsy in 2003. In her winding-up speech, will the Minister tell us how her Department has delivered on it? Has access to neurology services improved, bearing in mind that spending money is not the same as improving services, and that the £1.2 million that was earmarked was delivered through the short-lived NHS Modernisation Agency?

Missed diagnosis and misdiagnosis are all too common for people with epilepsy. What plans do the Government have to improve and broaden the use of diagnostic services such as EEG scanning, particularly during sleep or after a time of being deprived of sleep, where appropriate? Have pathology and post-mortem services been modernised, and have support and information for families bereaved by epilepsy improved? On that particular issue, has the Minister yet looked into the cuts to chaplaincy services in our hospitals? They are key services in the support and counselling of those who are dealing with sickness and death.

Likewise, could the Minister tell us what percentage of general practitioners are GPs with special interests—that is the title that is now bandied about—and, of those, how many are trained in neurology? What progress have the medicines management programmes made? The all-party group said that a review of the action plan is needed urgently. I hope that the Minister will tell us whether she agrees and what she is doing about it.

The all-party group expressed its concern about non-implementation of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines on epilepsy. The Minister will be aware of her predecessors' failure—I am sorry to use the word—to avoid boom and bust in our NHS. The Government's financial mismanagement resulted in cuts to our NHS last year. With a national service framework still eight years away, there is nothing to give epilepsy services the credence that they need at a local level. Until the Government accept the measures set out in our independence and accountability White Paper, the lack of accountability to patients and the public by the ministerial team in particular and by our NHS will continue to render the Government's cry of local blame farcical and deeply cynical.

The Minister will be aware of the statement that the Department of Health made to the BBC in response to the report:

"In cases where evidence is brought to the department that local NHS is not funding NICE guidance then we will ask Strategic Health Authorities to intervene."

How many such cases have she and her Department so far been presented with?

The subject of epilepsy specialist nurses is obviously one that is close to the Minister's heart, as she was formerly a nurse. We are glad that someone in the health ministerial team has that background experience. The first ESN was appointed in 1988. There are now around 152, although epilepsy organisations have been campaigning for the number to increase to 920 in England. The 2004 NICE clinical guidelines stated that

"epilepsy specialist nurses should be an integral part of the network of care of individuals with epilepsy."

That was reinforced by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), when he said in answer to a parliamentary question:

"Specialist epilepsy nurses provide an additional clinical resource and have spearheaded the development of nurse led and fast access clinics, monitoring treatment regimes and seizure control, support and information on aspects of medication and side effects and lifestyle precautions."—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2006; Vol. 453, c. 77W.]

In spite of that, some 8 per cent. of ESNs across the UK are threatened with redundancy, reduced hours or assignment to non-specialist duties, or are not being replaced.

Furthermore, 72 of the current ESN posts were created because of pump-priming funding through Epilepsy Action. Agreements were made with the NHS trusts concerned that the posts would continue once the pump-priming funding expired. Through the scheme, Epilepsy Action provided £30,000 to £50,000 of financial support to NHS trusts to set up epilepsy specialist nurse services. Since the scheme was set up in 1995, more than £2.5 million has been invested, and 83 nurse posts have been created in the NHS. However, seven NHS trusts have not honoured their agreement to continue funding the posts once the pump-priming funding ceases. Not only is that deeply disturbing—indeed, shameful—in its own right, it jeopardises the provision of future seed-funding by charities that are involved in long-term and special conditions such as epilepsy. Another example would be the funding in 2003 by the Community Fund and the Wolfson Foundation of a new MRI scanner for the National Society for Epilepsy, which is another key member of the Joint Epilepsy Council. What does the Minister have to say to the seven trusts that have cut the funding?

I received an interesting answer to a parliamentary question the other day. In it, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who was then a Health Minister, revealed:

"In relation specifically to the treatment of patients with epilepsy, paramedics can supply and administer rectal diazepam, whilst EMTs"—

emergency medical technicians—

"can only administer the drug if it was already in the possession of the patient."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 2007; Vol. 462, c. 228W.]

That answer seems to suggest that there is little difference between paramedics and emergency medical technicians, yet when we consider the APPG's finding that 70,000 patients do not get the drugs that they need, that response becomes much less innocuous. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, a former Health Minister, also told me that there is no regular collection of data on how often ambulances carry paramedics and that ambulance staffing is up to the local ambulance trust. It seems that those with epilepsy have a postcode lottery in not only elective care, but emergency care.

I come now to a matter that has not yet been mentioned and may even be regarded by some as de minimis. In my increasingly distant past I used to suffer from a severe form of migraine called cluster headache, which has nothing to do with epilepsy. Fluorescent lighting was an immediate trigger of cluster headache and was extremely difficult to deal with. I was intrigued to note that in answer to a parliamentary question asked by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Cox), the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Bury, South admitted:

"It is known that some people living with lupus and epilepsy, and other long-term conditions, may be affected by energy saving light bulbs. We have made no assessment of the number of such people affected."—[*Official Report*, 12 June 2007; Vol. 461, c. 992W.]

That seems somewhat cavalier of the Government, particularly considering that in March this year the last Prime Minister and other EU leaders agreed to phase out old-fashioned bulbs in private homes by 2009—that is quite a short period of time—in order to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Given concerns about the effect that the show surrounding the presentation of the new London Olympics logo had on those with epileptic conditions, it is vital that we take such potential threats seriously. If the Minister has not made an assessment in relation to that, I hope that she will inform us what steps the Department is prepared to take to ban the sale of tungsten bulbs, either directly through the Government or via the EU directive. I am, of course, fully supportive—as I think we all are—of encouraging the move to energy saving light bulbs. However, we must ensure that we do not condemn thousands of people to an existence that provokes a condition that for them outweighs the unquestionable benefit to the environment, let alone the burden put on health services.

On 24 June the Department told the *Daily Mail*:

"This is a developing area and we have no further comment".

I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to ensure that that is regarded as an historical statement and that she has something further to say on the matter.

Once again, I pay tribute to the APPG and the Joint Epilepsy Council for producing this rigorous report. I know from my work with the all-party group on malaria what an undertaking it is to produce a report of such significance and authority. I hope that the Minister will join me in that sentiment, and will address the concerns raised by the report and those mentioned during this debate.

12.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): Thank you for calling me, Miss Begg.

Chris McCafferty: I realise that I failed to congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on her important and well deserved appointment. I want to put that on the record before she responds—I am not looking for any special favours.

Ann Keen: My hon. Friend may not be looking for special favours, but she is going the right way to get them. I thank other hon. Members who have congratulated me, particularly the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) with whom I look forward to working. I am surprised that although he is surrounded by so many nurses in his home life, he managed to escape to the Conservative party. Perhaps we can look at that in more detail at another time.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on her success in the Speaker's ballot and on choosing epilepsy services as her subject. Given the number of people who live with epilepsy and the level of stigma that unfortunately still exists in society, it is indeed an important issue. I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon), who is no longer present—I understand that hon. Members have had to leave to carry on with their busy day—mentioned the stigma, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned the family stigma.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury was kind enough to mention my former profession. On many occasions when working in an accident and emergency department—or casualty, as it used to be called—I have cared for members of the public who have suffered grand mal attacks. I know how distressing it is to observe an attack, and how distressing it is to phone the family if the person concerned is not with a family member at the time. I also know that caring for anyone suffering from epilepsy, at whatever level, within a family is exceptionally distressing because of the stigma.

I want to mention the importance of the all-party group's report. I have read it in detail and have been astonished by some of the findings. If I cannot answer all the questions asked in today's debate, I will give every member of the group—which is chaired by Baroness Gould—and other hon. Members a commitment to seriously consider the recommendations and I accept the invitation to attend the all-party group, with which I look forward to working.

We need to be clear that the findings and conclusions of the report affect us all. The messages are not just for Government, but for NHS managers, front-line practitioners and those who commission health services. Clearly, people with epilepsy need and deserve better services and over the past few years we have sought to address those concerns.

I would like to put on the record some of the areas in which we have made improvements. In 2002, we

[Ann Keen]

welcomed the sponsorship by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence of a national clinical audit of epilepsy-related deaths. The audit looked at investigations into those deaths, care provided prior to death, and contact with bereaved families. In 2003, we followed up the audit with the publication of our epilepsy action plan, which drew the attention of clinicians and local health organisations to the need to establish or review policies and practices regarding the management of epilepsy and epilepsy-related deaths. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell) raised the issue of the coroner and the hon. Member for Eddisbury discussed what we need to do with coroners' reports and with pathology. I can assure hon. Members that we will consider all those detailed questions and seek to address them. If I receive an invitation from the all-party group, perhaps I could bring more information on those issues to a meeting.

The Department of Health commissioned NICE to produce a clinical guideline for the diagnosis, management and treatment of epilepsy, which was published in 2004. Additionally, the national service framework for long-term conditions, which was published in March 2005 and about which I will speak in more detail later, focuses on improving services across England for a range of neurological conditions, including epilepsy. Through the quality and outcome framework, we have also taken steps to ensure that GPs provide good quality care for people with epilepsy. Undoubtedly, we will have to look at different levels of training and monitor what happens to patients who present to their GP and how we follow up those cases. It is too early to tell how many practices have been successful in this area, but we will know later in the year when QOF data on the 2006-07 financial year are published.

The diagnosis and the importance of MRI scans and sleep electroencephalograms has also been mentioned. We are making good progress on waiting times for MRI scans, which are crucial for early diagnosis and intervention, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley). Between January 2006 and 2007, over 13 week waits fell by more than 90 per cent. from, I believe, 20,585 to 1,959. Over 26 week waits have fallen by more than 99 per cent., and I believe that now only 23 people, who have a range of conditions, are waiting more than 26 weeks for a MRI scan. We need to do more, but I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that that is a huge improvement. That figure compares with almost 5,000 when we started collecting data. Clearly, we have done much to support NHS organisations in improving epilepsy services. However, I know of the often-voiced concern that without targets or dedicated funding there is neither the power nor the incentive to force through improvements.

National standards will always be necessary to protect people against inequalities in service provision, but in taking forward our improvement and reform agenda we need a decisive shift from top-down to bottom-up as we develop a devolved and self-improving health service, in which the main drivers for change are patients, commissioners and clinicians, rather than national targets and performance management. The all-party epilepsy group's report and the witnesses that gave evidence very ably will do an awful lot to bring about a patient-centred epilepsy service.

Effective commissioning by primary care trusts is paramount. We expect local commissioners and providers to reprioritise the way in which existing resources are used to better meet the needs and wishes of their population. The changes are being supported by a programme of reforms that include the choice agenda, payment by results and practice-based commissioning. However, all Members present will understand that to deliver positive changes on the ground to health care, we need good leadership on the ground. It is for my Department to encourage and monitor that leadership, because although to devolve responsibility might be a comfortable solution, we cannot walk away. Leadership should come at a national and local level, and I give my assurances that I shall monitor that leadership to ensure that we make that progress.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: I am very interested in the point that the Minister is making. She is absolutely right. However, does she agree that leadership can be provided as much by those with clinical responsibilities as by managers?

Ann Keen: I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman, which is why the review of the NHS in general is being led by clinicians at every level, by people who work in the service and by patients. The review undertaken in London by my colleague the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, Professor Sir Ara Darzi, and that for the rest of the NHS managed that very successfully. There is no other way of doing it; users and their families, clinicians, from the top dogs, so to speak, right the way through professions allied to medicine, and all of those who work in our good national health service need to feel involved.

The hon. Gentleman was kind, again, to mention my specialist interest. Specialist nurses must be brought to the forefront. The deployment of specialist nurses is of particular concern to stakeholders, and the all-party epilepsy group's report requests an immediate commitment to increase the number of epilepsy specialist nurses to 600. Before I respond to that point, however, I take the opportunity to commend the work of Epilepsy Action, which through the Sapphire nurse scheme is doing sterling work to support the appointment of specialist nurses in hospitals throughout the United Kingdom.

I can totally reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley that we support maximising the use of the specialised skills of specialist nurses. Indeed, we are proud that the UK leads the world in the development of specialist nursing roles. We ignore the nurse at our peril!

Mr. O'Brien: Tell me about it.

Ann Keen: I thought the hon. Gentleman would be able to relate to that.

Decisions, however, on the skill mix required for patient care are best made at a local level. It is for local health economies to determine how many specialist nurses they require and to prioritise the resources needed for the necessary work force development.

Nevertheless, we want to ensure that local health economies are encouraged to utilise fully the skills and experience of specialist nurses. In May, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), held a summit with the MS Society, Epilepsy Action, the Parkinson's Disease Society and the Royal College of Nursing to discuss those very concerns. There was an agreement to produce best practice guidance and to encourage PCTs to advocate the role of specialist nurses across the country.

Having enough staff with the right skills and experience, who are well led and well supported, is of course key to implementing the national service framework for long-term conditions. The national service framework is now our key delivery mechanism for improving services for people with neurological conditions across England. The hon. Member for Romsey asked about the number of neurologists. I believe that the answer is 437. So we have areas to look at concerning the number of neurologists. However, people with neurological conditions will get a faster diagnosis, more rapid treatment and a comprehensive package of care. In addition, all people with long-term conditions will be supported so that they can live as full and independent a life as possible. Those are some ambitious plans. I am very aware of the implications of saying that implementation is a different matter.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) invited me to see work being done in her constituency, and I acknowledge the work that she has done and the spirit in which she made her comments. It is important that the Government and the all-party epilepsy group reflect on that matter and look at how we can work together to bring about the necessary long-term changes.

Successful implementation of the national service framework is of vital importance to us. We are working with a range of key stakeholders to identify and develop practical tools and advice that can help local services and organisations to deliver the NSF. That means that services for people with neurological conditions from diagnosis to the end of life will progressively improve.

My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley has been successful not only in securing this debate, but in bringing to it the enthusiasm that she brings to everything that she has done since she has been a Member of the House. I know that in the work that she has done through listening to witnesses for the report, she has not pushed the matter to one side. She has approached it with the commitment that she has brought to everything else since she has been a Member of the House. At this point, it is particularly important that we raise the good practice taking place already. It is easy to place too much emphasis on what is not working rather than reflecting on and celebrating what is working well. Yes, there are problems and yes, the case for improving the quality of services overall is compelling, but that should not overshadow the good work that is currently taking place.

For one example of good practice, I would like to mention King's College hospital, which is providing a comprehensive service from diagnosis to treatment. High quality care is being provided also through the community-based service in east Kent. That is an example of the direction of travel in which we want to see services going, which would embrace networks of general practitioners, with a special interest, and epilepsy nurses working in collaboration with the local neurology service.

Through the national service framework, NICE guidance and the epilepsy action plan we have set out very clearly what the expectations are for the pattern of services for people with epilepsy. We have mentioned, in this debate, the services to prisoners and those in our prison care service. Much work has to be done, and I give another commitment to work with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that that takes place.

I might not have managed to answer other questions, in particular those concerning new light bulbs and the Olympic logo, but they are serious issues. It is important that we really assist those with neurological symptoms and problems, under a diagnosis of epilepsy, and that they are seriously catered for, as they would be if they had any other condition causing alarm to them and their families.

Mr. O'Brien: The Minister might want also to bring the Department for Transport into her joint working approach, because often those diagnosed with an epileptic condition find it very difficult, not least because they have to rely on so many others for their transport needs, as often they cannot secure a driving licence. That is another area that could be joined up.

Ann Keen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Yes, I would take that forward, because travel is so important to any age group. Someone who has had to lose their driving licence may find it very difficult to explain that to friends and family. Perhaps they will not raise it and family members will not want to say, "This is why we have a difficulty." That situation is not easy and I relate to it exceptionally well.

We take the findings of the APPG's report seriously, as I hope my response today has shown. Reforming health care is all about finding out the facts, identifying the problems and facing up to the challenges with strategic solutions. We share the desire of my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley for people living with epilepsy to receive the services that they need and deserve. I assure her that the Government will continue to provide support and leadership to the health service to ensure that that happens. Leadership locally, which my hon. Friend has shown, can perhaps encourage us all to deliver leadership throughout the health service.

Cancer Screening

12.21 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce a debate on cancer screening, which is a continuation of an interest that I have had ever since I entered the House. I had debates on cervical cancer screening in 2001 and on screening in general in 2003. As the Minister may have guessed if she has had an opportunity to see the record, I want to use this debate to take forward the questions that I was raising at that stage. I have two reasons for wanting to do so. First, I am conscious that this issue is of very great concern to my constituents, particularly women. I discovered in 2001 that there was a major campaign in my constituency and 5,000 women wrote to me, specifically requesting that I raise in Parliament the issue of how to improve cervical cancer screening, as new technology was becoming available that would reduce the risk of omissions from the screening process.

As I explained in the previous debate, I also have a personal motivation. I lost my wife to breast cancer. She was diagnosed aged 43 and I have always been haunted by thoughts of whether, if screening had taken place for women in their 40s as opposed to 50s and 60s, her cancer would have been picked up at an earlier stage and she would have been saved.

In general, cancer screening is one of the great success stories of the NHS. It is more advanced than in almost every other developed country. It has been done on a mass scale, certainly for cervical cancer and breast cancer, for many years and many lives have been saved as a consequence, so it is a positive story, and big advances have been made in the past 10 years in respect of the big three cancers to which screening applies. I want to acknowledge that, while asking questions about the process.

It clearly appeals to elementary common sense to suggest that if we have screening, conditions can be picked up at an earlier stage, avoiding not just premature death but unnecessary surgery. I recognise, of course, that there are limits to that process. There are limits to screening technology, which mean, for example, that it is not applied in the case of some cancers. Prostate cancer is one for which there is not sufficient precision. I also recognise that there has to be a test of cost and benefits. We cannot just have indiscriminate screening of all age groups for all conditions.

Initially, I shall ask a few questions and pursue the issue of cervical cancer screening, in respect of which there have been major advances. There is a long history in Britain, through the smear test, of saving very large numbers of women from that condition. Some of the progress is recognised in the fact that we screen 3.5 million women annually; I understand that there is 80 per cent. coverage. Roughly 4,500 lives a year are saved as a result of the screening process, and I think that deaths have now come down to fewer than 1,000 a year. That is a major success story, with continually falling death rates since about 1990. The big transformation in recent years has been the introduction of the liquid-based cytology tests, which are much more accurate and avoid the 20 per cent. failure rate that occurred under the old testing system.

If the Minister does not have the answers to my questions to hand, I hope that she will write to me. First, since the new LBC system was successfully introduced in Scotland—I think that that was completed by 2004—why has it taken so long to spread it through England? Can she give us some clarity about when the roll-out is expected to be completed? I understand that we are talking about next year, but is it the beginning or end of next year? Is that known?

Secondly, there are substantial disparities between the home countries in respect of the age groups covered by the smear testing arrangements as enhanced by the LBC test. The age group is 20 to 60 in Scotland, 20 to 65 in Wales and 25 to 64 in England. There is nothing wrong with that at all—indeed, there is much to be said for experimentation and trying different approaches—but what lessons have been learned from those different age profiles? Does one work better than another? Can we learn from Wales and Scotland? Are there any proposals to adapt the age profile?

Thirdly, can the Minister confirm the worry that some cancer charities have expressed? One in particular, called Jo's Trust, has written to me and I met representatives at a reception in the House of Commons. It is particularly concerned with young women and has pointed to the fact that there appears to be a serious tailing off in the number of young women in their late 20s who are going for the screening. Have the Government analysed that? Do they know the reasons for it and do they have any answers to it?

My final set of questions about cervical cancer screening relates to the new technology that is becoming available as a result of the understanding that, unlike other cancers, cervical cancer is caused by a virus—a sexually transmitted virus. I think that the science was developed in the mid-1990s, and out of the understanding of the human papilloma virus come various potentialities. The first is whether the knowledge of HPV is being incorporated in screening: is it being used as part of the new screening process with LBC?

Secondly, the technology now makes it possible to vaccinate against cervical cancer. The Government were right and, indeed, quite courageous to bring in the new programme, which involves vaccinating girls before they leave school. It is hoped that that will greatly reduce the incidence of the disease at an early stage in its transmission. However, the cancer charities that are following this issue have raised various supplementary questions about that and perhaps the Minister will reflect on them. First, it appears that the next school year will be missed. I do not know whether that is correct; perhaps the Minister will confirm it. If it will be missed because of the difficulties of introducing vaccination across the board, what will happen to that age group? Will there be a follow-up, with encouragement and support in getting GP referrals to catch up?

What plans do the Government have to deal with what we might call the missing age group? I am referring to those young women who are too old to have caught the new vaccination programme at school, but who are too young to have the smear test, because they will not get it until they are 25. There is a 10-year group of young women who are missing altogether. What are the plans to deal with that? Is there a system

of enhanced GP referral, for example, which would enable them to be captured?

I also have some questions for the Minister about the progress being made in the breast cancer screening programme. That, too, is a major success story for the NHS. It has been going for a very long time, particularly for women aged 50 to 64, and the age group has now been expanded by five years, which is a very welcome step. The analysis shows that about 1,400 lives a year are being saved. As with cervical cancer, there is clinical evidence of a substantial disparity between the survival rate for those who are screened, which is about 95 per cent. over five years, and the survival rate for those who are not screened. The difference, however, is that breast cancer numbers are rising substantially, whereas cervical cancer numbers are falling, and I wonder whether that might have something to do with the difference in the take-up of screening.

One thing that I find difficult to understand is why the take-up of breast cancer screening is significantly lower than the take-up of cervical cancer screening. After all, we are talking not about young women, but about mature women, who are presumably very conscious of their health. We are also talking about the same obstacles in terms of information and literacy. Why, then, should the take-up for breast cancer mammographic screening be significantly lower than for cervical cancer screening? The figure for breast cancer screening is about 75 per cent. on average, as against 80 per cent. for cervical cancer screening. In my area, as the Minister will know because she lives close by and represents a constituency next to mine, breast screening take-up is well below the national average, even though people are generally fairly prosperous and well educated. I have asked the primary care trust to address some of the technical problems, such as the location of the screening site and so on, but the figure is still low, and I wonder how much work has gone into understanding why take-up rates are low and whether they can be improved.

The big issue on breast cancer screening is age, and as I explained to the Minister, I have a personal interest in pursuing this. Everybody welcomes the extension of screening to older women, but the outstanding question is whether there would be value in extending it down the age range to women between 45 and 50 or between 40 and 50. When I last asked that question four years ago, the Government felt that the evidence was not compelling. There have been some pilot studies since then, and I wondered whether there had been any rethink about the desirability of extending the age range to catch younger middle-aged women, substantial numbers of whom get cancer.

My final point on breast cancer screening is that, as with all cancers, screening is only as good as the subsequent cures and treatments. There is no point screening people if they are not promptly dealt with and there is a long-standing issue about the speed of treatment for breast cancer patients. Are the Minister and her officials aware of an article that appeared in the *British Medical Journal* in recent months, which was based on a case study in Bristol and pointed to the difficulties with the so-called two-week rule? Apparently, GPs are putting a lot of women in the non-urgent category, where cancer diagnosis is growing rapidly, so something is not working with the two-week rule and the other principles designed to get people quickly into treatment.

The third and final category about which I wish to ask the Minister is bowel cancer screening. It is a big step forward and very welcome that the Government have accepted that there is value in screening for bowel cancer, which is of course different from cervical cancer and breast cancer in that it affects men at least as much as—indeed, probably more than—women. There is a large number of fatalities—about 16,000 a year, or about half of those who are diagnosed—and the number is growing rapidly. An estimated 2,500 people a year could be saved if screening were effective, so it is very welcome that the Government have taken a step forward.

I speak on the issue with some local interest because one of the leading charities—Beating Bowel Cancer—is located in St. Margaret's in my constituency. It is a strong advocate of the screening process, and some of us participate annually in its loud tie day, which is one of its gimmicks to make the subject more attractive. For obvious physical reasons, bowel cancer is not something that people particularly want to talk about, and the charity has done a brilliant job in overcoming some of that psychological resistance.

The screening programme is now being rolled out, which is very welcome, and the primary care trust in my area was one of the first in London to adopt it. However, I have some questions about how the process is working. First, the roll-out has been going on for a year, so do the Government have any preliminary conclusions? If so, when will they publish them? Secondly, some of the feedback from the work that has been done suggests that uptake is quite low and that only half of those who are tested return the kits, as they are required to do. Is anything being done to raise that problem and deal with it? Thirdly, do the Government have the funding to complete the envisaged three-year roll-out? Finally, are interesting conclusions being drawn as a result of different age ranges being applied in Scotland, Wales and England?

My final point about bowel cancer is that, as with other forms of cancer, the success of the Government's programme depends entirely on whether those who are screened can get treatment. As the Minister will know, difficult and emotive issues have been raised as regards the drugs that are made available to bowel cancer patients once they have been screened and diagnosed. A constituent called Adam Griffin, who is only 30, has run up against the barrier that was created by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence when it ruled that Erbitux and another bowel cancer drug, Avastin, could be made available only in exceptional circumstances, and several young people in their 20s and 30s in London are being denied those drugs because of that new ruling. I know the difficulties involved, and these drugs are expensive, but I wonder whether the Government take account of age in interpreting the phrase "in exceptional circumstances". Common sense suggests that if people can be saved from premature death in their 20s and 30s, they would, quite apart from any humanitarian consideration, have a much longer life to live, so the value of the treatment would be much greater. How much flexibility is there in that respect? A lot of emotion has, rightly, been generated

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

around Herceptin, but there are some equally dramatic and difficult issues around bowel cancer drugs.

That rather broader question takes us a bit away from screening, but I wonder whether the Government are responding to the rather critical study by the Swedish Karolinska institute. The study suggested that despite Britain's screening record, which is second to none in the developed world, we rank among the worst in terms of the availability of cancer drugs. The study partly attributed the relatively low cancer survival rate in the UK to that limited availability.

My final point—I have just exceeded my 15 minutes, so it is my final point—is that some cancer conditions cannot be dealt with through screening because the science is insufficiently precise, and we are always told that prostate cancer is one of those conditions. It is increasing rapidly among men, which is not necessarily as insidious as it seems, because it is a condition of very elderly men, who have many other problems. I was recently invited to an MPs' health check and I was very struck by the fact that I was offered a prostate cancer test, thereby becoming one of the 6 per cent. of men who are tested. I therefore have one simple question: if such tests are good enough for MPs and for 6 per cent. of the population, why can the other 94 per cent. not enjoy them?

12.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing the debate. As he recognised, we have neighbouring constituencies and share the same acute trust—the West Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust. He also mentioned the personal side of the debate, and I acknowledge that.

The earlier detection of cancer is vital to long-term efforts to reduce cancer mortality. Where screening for cancer is possible, it is an essential tool in detecting abnormalities at an early stage. That is why the NHS cancer plan proposed a major expansion of our cancer screening programmes, where it is clear that that can reduce mortality. The efforts of the service to deliver that expansion are now coming to fruition.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned breast cancer screening, and the NHS breast screening programme was the first such programme in the EU. It is regarded as one of the best screening programmes in the world and is estimated to save 1,400 lives a year. I wish that our media would portray such things, rather than the negative issues that are usually associated with cancer and cancer screening.

In March 2005 we completed two of the objectives set by the NHS cancer plan. The screening age was extended to include women aged 65 to 70, and the service was fully upgraded so that two X-ray views of each breast are taken at all screening rounds. As a result of those changes, the breast screening programme screened more women and detected more cancers than ever before in 2005-06; 1.63 million women were screened and more than 13,500 cancers were detected, which implies a 62 per cent. increase since 2001; 40 per cent. of the cancers detected were small cancers that could not have been detected by a hand examination.

We cannot, however, be complacent, and we are always looking at ways of improving the service, as long as there is a clear evidence base. For example, the evidence to support inviting women aged over 70, on a population basis, is not clear. That is why research has been commissioned on behalf of the advisory committee on breast cancer screening. Women over 70 can still self-refer for breast screening every three years, and we have collaborated with Age Concern on a leaflet to remind women of that. I am sure that all hon. Members will welcome that, and actively encourage Age Concern's involvement. In the areas that the hon. Gentleman and I represent it is important to look for ways to approach education in such matters for the ethnic minority communities.

The hon. Gentleman raised the matter of cervical cancer, which is the subject of the NHS's other longest running screening programme; again, it was the first such programme in the EU. The introduction of cervical screening has prevented an epidemic of cervical cancer and is estimated to be preventing up to 5,000 deaths a year. In 2005-06, 79.5 per cent. of eligible women in England had had a test result in the previous five years, 3.6 million women were screened and laboratories reported 4 million tests. However, again, we are not complacent. Following the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence technological appraisal in 2003, we are rolling out the use of liquid-based cytology across the service. That will reduce the number of inadequate tests and speed up the reading of slides. It will mean that 300,000 women a year will not have go through the anxiety of being called back and retested because their slides could not be read.

For women under 25 screening is not a good idea and can do more harm than good, because the cervix is not properly developed. More research on that is taking place. The 2005 Labour party general election manifesto contained a commitment to speeding up cervical screening results. The LBC is a key aspect of that, and the commitment is being taken forward through the cancer reform strategy, which will be published at the end of the year. A more recent development in our battle against cervical cancer has been the advent of human papilloma virus vaccines. HPV is implicated in nearly all cervical cancers. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has recommended that an HPV vaccine should be routinely offered to girls aged around 12 years.

The hon. Gentleman raised a very new area of screening—that for bowel cancer. The NHS bowel cancer screening programme began in April 2006, and full national roll-out is expected by December 2009. It is one of the first national bowel screening programmes in the world, and it is the first cancer screening programme in England to invite men as well as women. Once it is fully operational, each year, around 3 million men and women in their 60s will be sent a self-sampling kit to use in the privacy of their homes. It is an ambitious project and, when fully implemented, will detect around 3,000 bowel cancers every year. I am pleased to say that those of the hon. Gentleman's constituents who are in their 60s began to be invited to participate in the programme on 8 January.

We are committed to introducing a screening programme for prostate cancer if and when screening and treatment techniques become sufficiently well

developed. I note the point that the hon. Gentleman made about what he was offered in the House. The Department of Health is supporting the development of screening technology for prostate cancer by way of a comprehensive research strategy. Prostate cancer is the only cancer with a departmental research funding target, and we continue to fund at least £4.2 million of prostate cancer research each year.

The hon. Gentleman and I both attended an Ovarian Cancer Action charity reception yesterday. The NHS cancer plan committed the Government to introducing ovarian cancer screening as and when research demonstrates that screening is appropriate and cost-effective. The research is well under way, and the UK collaborative trial of ovarian cancer screening began in 2000; results are expected in 2012. The cancer used to be called the silent killer, but we now have evidence to suggest that we can do more. I welcome the research, having taken an active interest in ovarian cancer for some time.

We need, of course, to screen for and monitor other cancers. However, participation is very important, and the hon. Gentleman raised the important issue of increasing participation in our screening programmes. We agree with him, but we must encourage people to attend for screening in a responsible way. People who are invited to participate in our cancer screening programmes need to understand the potential benefits and harms in doing so and to be able to make an informed choice about whether they want to proceed. That is why all people who are eligible to participate in the programmes receive a national information leaflet when they are invited for screening. Those leaflets have been translated into 19 languages; posters and CDs are also available in seven languages.

Cancer screening will form a major part of the cancer reform strategy. As part of the strategy we will be looking at new ways of encouraging people to make the decision to attend screening; that applies particularly to those from more deprived groups, whose uptake of screening has historically been poor. I hope that the leaflets in different languages and the way we approach education in communities where English is not the first language will help to improve constituents' quality of life.

I pay tribute to all organisations and MPs who keep the issue of breast cancer in the public and Government eye. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in thanking all the staff who have worked so hard in making our cancer screening programmes some of the best in the world, and particularly those in screening programmes in the areas that we represent. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate to the House.

12.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

Cycling Deaths (Abergele)

1 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): On 8 January 2006, Thomas Harland, aged 14, Maurice Broadbent, aged 61, Dave Horrocks, aged 55, and Wayne Wilkes, aged 42—all members of the Rhyl cycling club—were killed when a car ploughed into their group after skidding on ice on the A547 near Abergele. Although the tragedy occurred just outside my constituency, three of the four cyclists were my constituents, and the father of Thomas Harland was a close personal friend. It was and remains Britain's worst traffic accident involving cyclists.

Following the accident, I asked the Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), to visit the scene of the crash and to meet the victims' families and the North Wales police. I raised the matter at Prime Minister's questions, arranged for two members of the Rhyl cycling club to meet a transport Minister here in the House and have tabled a number of parliamentary written questions. I have also tabled Question 3 for Prime Minister's questions tomorrow, when I shall raise the issue of the coroner's report with the Prime Minister.

I pay tribute to the relatives of those killed in the accident. They have conducted themselves with dignity. I also pay tribute to the *Daily Post*, and to its reporter Roland Hughes for his excellent, sensitive and detailed coverage of the accident and the coroner's inquest. I have brought some of the *Daily Post* reports with me and I will be drawing on them heavily—I acknowledge that at the outset. Finally, I pay tribute to coroner John Hughes, whose inquiry has raised a number of issues that must be addressed not just in Denbighshire, Conwy and Wales but throughout the nation.

The first issue is police protocol on two matters. When ice is spotted on the road, what is the protocol for reporting accidents to the control room? The other matter is the protocol governing the control room's reporting of such incidents to the relevant local authority. There are 43 police forces and 430 local authorities in England and Wales. An absence of protocols, or a protocol that is not strictly adhered to, is a recipe for disaster. Will the Minister seek clarification from his advisers on whether such a protocol exists? I have given them at least 20 minutes to find the answer.

I shall describe the police response to the reporting and actioning of numerous accidents involving ice on or near the A547 on the day of the tragic accident in order to illustrate some shortcomings that have not been addressed. On the day of the accident, police did not tell local councils about four crashes and near misses on icy roads near the site of the Rhyl cycling tragedy. Four drivers—including three on and off-duty police officers—skidded on or near the A547 in the hours leading up to the tragedy, but police did not think it necessary to tell Conwy county council's highways department that the roads should be gritted, despite the fact that one accident occurred within Conwy's boundary, just two metres from the county boundary and one mile away from the boundary in Denbighshire. The only time that police rang Conwy's highways staff was when a car skidded on ice more than two miles away.

[Chris Ruane]

At the inquest into the cyclists' death, police admitted that they had no fixed policy on alerting highways chiefs to icy roads, but said that it was expected of them. That is what I want to flush out. What is expected and what is not? I want a better definition.

A police officer who skidded twice on the Denbighshire side of the Borth crossroads, half a mile away, called the control room at about 3.30 am to say:

"The road is like glass here...I'm not sure if it's policy to call out the council".

He stated publicly:

"In our opinion, the road needed gritting immediately and the council needed informing at the least. We had expected those messages to have been acted upon."

He was unsure of the policy. I am sure that if we were to ask other police officers around the country what the policy is, their responses would be similar. Neither Denbighshire county council nor Conwy, whose boundary is only metres away, were alerted by police to the icy conditions.

At 5.30 am, another accident occurred. An off-duty police officer, a friend of mine, was involved. He lost control on the Borth crossroads, only metres inside the Denbighshire boundary. Neither the Denbighshire nor the Conwy highways department was alerted to the conditions. At about 6.45, another off-duty police officer came off the A525 a mile from the tragedy. Again, the highway authorities were not informed. The only time that highway officials were contacted was at about 8.50 am, after two cars skidded on ice at a bridge in Towyn. A police control room worker mistakenly called Denbighshire—some Members might be unaware of the local geography, as indeed were some of the control staff—saying that the accidents had occurred on the Foryd bridge, which straddles the border between Conwy and Denbighshire. The control room informed Denbighshire that the accident was in its jurisdiction, but it was in fact a mile and a half away on the Towyn bridge in Conwy.

The highways department rectified the mistake shortly afterward, but the incident illustrates the need for local knowledge in order to pinpoint locations. It also illustrates the confusion that can occur if control room staff do not have such information at hand. If they do not know the co-ordinates and cannot report exactly where an accident occurred, they could quite easily end up alerting the wrong authority, as they did in the incident that I described, leading to delay or causing the wrong area to be gritted, with deadly consequences.

I have described a catalogue of errors that contributed to the death of the four cyclists. Is the Minister satisfied that robust procedures are in place for the reporting and actioning of accidents involving ice for every police force in England and Wales? Are they sufficiently understood by police and civilian staff? Confusion can arise if control room staff do not have the exact co-ordinates of an accident, but it can also arise without robust procedures for staff shift changes.

The latter had a bearing on the tragic accident that we are debating. As well as those that I have described, one final accident occurred on exactly the same spot as the fatal crash, just one hour before. The control operator mistakenly told her replacement colleague that both Denbighshire and Conwy gritters were operating, so when the accident was reported, no action was taken. Does the Minister feel that the rules governing shift changes in control rooms need to be reviewed? I spent 25 days with the North Wales police under the police parliamentary scheme, and I am aware that when ordinary bobbies on the beat change shifts, a debriefing session is held. Does that take place in control rooms? Should staff sit down together to debrief each other?

The coroner suggested that a hard copy of all reported incidents involving inclement weather should be left on the desk when staff change over, so that operatives do not have to go back into the computer. They would have no excuse—the information would be before them on the table in black and white. They could not ignore it. That simple suggestion could improve safety dramatically.

In summing up after the inquest, Mr. Hughes said that the way in which information was passed on by the police patrol room left a lot to be desired. I share his concerns and urge the Minister to do all that he can to prevent a repetition of such failings in all police forces in England and Wales. I say "England and Wales" because I know that the Minister has jurisdiction for England and Wales, but I also urge him to contact the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, so that they can learn from these mistakes.

Mr. Harland is a personal friend, and I took the family, including young Tom, on a tour of Parliament two or three years ago. They are a lovely, lovely family. When I contacted him to tell him about this debate and to ask whether he wanted me to relay anything to the Minister, he said that

"the main lesson I would like to see learnt is that a single incident suspected of ice should be treated as a road closure situation in every case until it is clarified/dealt with/made safe.

If you can get that written down as a standard practice for Police Forces throughout the UK then you will have achieved something positive from our tragedy.

The situation of suspected ice should be treated (as standard practice) the same as a chemical/oil spillage, which would result in a road closure, as in all these scenarios death can and does result."

Will the Minister accede to that request from a bereaved father?

The next issue may not be the Minister's direct responsibility, but I want to apprise him of it so that he has a full picture of exactly what happened, and of the interplay of his Department with local authorities and justice Departments. The issue is the role played by local authorities' gritting departments.

One of the key lessons to be learned from this tragic accident is the need for a national review of the protocol that governs arrangements for gritting roads that cross county boundaries. This accident occurred 0.9 miles from the Denbighshire border. The A547 runs for approximately five miles between Rhuddlan in Denbighshire and Abergele in Conwy, and the accident occurred almost on the border. On the day of the accident, the Denbighshire side of the A547 was gritted early in the morning, and I congratulate Denbighshire on that. The Conwy side was not gritted, despite the fact that accidents were reported. Had that road been

gritted, this accident might not have occurred. A simple agreement between neighbouring authorities could help to share the gritting of principal highways and known danger spots, so that it does not stop arbitrarily at the county border. That would be eminently sensible. If someone is driving and hears rock salt knocking against the bottom of the car, they alter their driving accordingly. If they hit an icy spot after the county boundary, that can and will cause mayhem.

There was no protocol in place for any formal liaison between adjoining authorities before the accident. In fact, the inquest heard that the two neighbouring councils of Denbighshire and Conwy were always haggling over who should grit the road on which the four cyclists died. One control-room worker told the inquest:

"I never knew quite which council was responsible".

The on-duty highways officer for Conwy county council at the time of the accident was informed of an earlier accident by the police. He told the police that the road had already been gritted that morning, but that he that he would get someone to the scene of the accident immediately. That did not happen. He had decided to take no action, and to delay his decision to send someone out until he had received more reports of crashes. The coroner also asked why notes were scribbled in the margin next to the entry of the Towyn crash, when the rest of the operative's records were immaculate and pristine. He even went so far as to suggest that they had been altered.

Over the past five days, I have been trying to find out whether any protocol is up and running between Denbighshire and Conwy, 18 months and one winter after the accident. I have been informed that, in the great tradition of Wales, a committee has been formed, and that Denbighshire, my own local authority, is taking the lead role. When I asked to meet chief constable of North Wales, Richard Brunstrom, the chief executive of Denbighshire, Ian Millar, and the chief executive of Conwy, Derek Barker, I received positive, professional responses from the chief constable and the chief executive of Conwy. However, the chief executive of Denbighshire said:

"It is not clear to me what the locus of the Home Secretary is in matters to do with roads in Wales. Indeed the UK Government has very limited functions in this area: highways are a devolved matter with only limited exceptions such as signage design, national speed limits etc."

One would not have thought that we were discussing the deaths of four innocent people. I trust that my hon. Friend the Minister is as appalled as I am at that response. Mr. Millar has missed the big picture. Death is not a devolved matter. Wherever it occurs, we must look at the reasons, learn from mistakes and spread best practice around the UK and beyond.

Cross-border issues are of concern in the four nations of the UK. They are of particular concern in Wales, because we have 22 small local authorities with thousands of miles of borders and thousands of miles of roads crossing those boundaries. The matter should be considered seriously.

I now turn to the remaining issues that I want to raise, and again, the Minister may have only tangential, indirect responsibility, but I hope that he will take these issues back to his colleagues. The driver of the car involved in the crash, Mr. Robert Alan Harris, admitted that he was driving too fast for the weather conditions. His car had three defective tyres. A collision expert, PC George Skinner, blamed Mr. Harris for failing to drive at an appropriate speed for the road conditions. The ice on the road was patchy and there were enough dry patches for Mr. Harris to regain control of his vehicle. PC Skinner said that if Mr. Harris had paid attention to the freezing conditions and not driven at 55mph, which was his estimated speed before the crash, it might not have happened. He said:

"It would have to be accepted that he failed to observe the ambient temperature display in his vehicle. He set off on his journey having scraped ice off the window of his car, and subsequently drove through countryside where visible frost lay."

He also said:

"He drove in an inappropriate manner for the prevailing conditions".

but added:

"In my opinion, there was sufficient grip available to the driver to control the vehicle. Had he driven according to the prevailing road conditions, as had the vast majority of motorists before this collision, then I am of the opinion this collision could have been avoided."

Despite all that evidence, the Crown Prosecution Service refused to prosecute Mr. Harris. The family have said that they were badly let down by the CPS. The coroner said that, and I say that. The family said:

"Our lawyers, on our behalf, made clear to the Chief Crown Prosecutor our disbelief at the decision not to prosecute Mr Harris for driving offences. We remain unhappy with that decision. In fact we feel badly let down by this decision, and that justice has not been done".

I want to apprise the Minister of the time taken by the inquest to reach its conclusion, and of the added burden on, and torment of, the families affected. The whole process could have been speeded up if the police, Conwy county council and their legal and insurance advisers had co-operated more fully with the coroner, John Hughes.

I do not expect the Minister to respond to the last two points, but I shall take them up with the Ministry of Justice and with the Prime Minister at Question Time tomorrow. I hope that the Minister will be able to meet me and the families when the police and the local authority have concluded their inquiry into the coroner's report.

1.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Vernon Coaker): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) not only on obtaining this debate and raising the important issue of safety on our roads, but on the dignity with which he has campaigned and the gravitas with which he conducted himself during a difficult debate. That is a credit to him and his constituents.

I was sad to hear of the tragic death of the four cyclists, Thomas Harland, Maurice Broadbent, David Horrocks and Wayne Wilkes, on a practice ride on the A547 near Abergele in north Wales on 8 January 2006. I express my deepest sympathies to their families, and pay tribute, as my hon. Friend did, to the dignity with which the families have conducted themselves following this terrible event.

[Mr. Vernon Coaker]

I am perfectly happy to meet my hon. Friend and the families to discuss with them the matters that he raised and his ideas so that, as Mr. Harland said, something positive comes out of this terrible tragedy. I am perfectly happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the whole issue of reporting to the police, what action the local authority should take and what protocols are in place. As far as I am aware, protocols do not exist, and the issue is an operational matter for each force, which will have systems by which officers report to the control room as they think appropriate, and the control room contacts agencies as it thinks appropriate. Following the accident and the coroner's report, it will be necessary for North Wales police to consider the situation, and one would hope and expect that following what happened, other police forces will also consider it. Again, we may discuss it at a meeting to understand the way in which we can take the process forward.

My hon. Friend appreciates that I cannot comment in detail about the police handling of individual cases, particularly as I understand that that incident is still the subject of a continuing inquiry by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, which North Wales police voluntarily requested. I shall turn in a while to the inquest into those tragic events, and to what has emerged from it, but first I shall briefly outline the general situation regarding police investigations of fatal road collisions, and the Government's position with respect to it.

The investigation of road traffic collisions and the enforcement of road traffic law are entirely operational matters for individual chief police officers. However, the police service is duty bound to investigate all serious incidents, particularly those involving death or serious injury, professionally and thoroughly. They will of course be expected to gather all the evidence from the scene, so that follow-up action can be taken as appropriate. In undertaking that work, all police forces now use the Association of Chief Police Officers road death investigation manual.

The manual brings out the need to investigate road deaths and serious injuries in order to serve justice. It recommends best practice for such investigations, and its overall aim is to standardise and improve the criteria observed during an investigation, and to promote a consistent approach. Of course, the manual's guidance and police best practice are relevant only after the event, when the tragedy has already occurred. What concerns us more is trying to prevent such tragedies in the first place. Indeed, my hon. Friend said that we should learn from what has happened in the incident under discussion, and that, although we cannot rewind the clock, as much as we would all like to, we should work out whether any lessons can be learned from it to prevent such a tragedy occurring again.

Roads policing and police motoring law enforcement have a vital role to play. That is reflected in the roads policing strategy statement, which was agreed by the Home Office, the Department for Transport and ACPO, and published in January 2005. It cites reducing road casualties as one of the five key actions on which roads policing will focus. It may be that during my next conversation with the ACPO lead on road policing, I can mention some of the general issues about the investigation of road traffic accidents, and the way in which the manual is applied, to work out whether lessons can be learned from the tragedy that my hon. Friend has described.

I now turn to the outcome of the inquest, and to any lessons that there might be for the police, especially the North Wales police. The inquest jury ruled out accidental death and returned a narrative verdict, delivering factual statements on events leading to the fatalities. They decided that the deaths were a direct result of an out-of-control vehicle crossing the carriageway and colliding with the oncoming cyclists. From the evidence, the jury deemed the following points to be contributing factors: the vehicle was being driven inappropriately for the adverse weather conditions; there was a serious lack of communications and guidance in the following areas, with critical information not being passed on to key personnel by all parties involved within the North Wales police area control room, between Conwy borough council and Denbighshire county council and between Conwy borough council's duty officer and his field staff. Conwy borough council lacked a proactive approach to its legal responsibilities, particularly with reference to its out-of-hours service.

The coroner subsequently publicly made his own critical comments about the North Wales police control room, communications between the councils and the failure to prosecute the driver of the vehicle involved—a point that my hon. Friend made. He knows that the last point is a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service, and I cannot comment on it. However, following the inquest, the coroner also wrote highlighting his concerns to the chief constable of North Wales police.

At the inquest, there emerged one issue that I know is of particular interest to my hon. Friend: road gritting. As the inquest jury were informed, North Wales police had earlier that day, following a motorist's report of skidding, advised Conwy council that roads needed treatment. It was then a matter for the council to review the state of local roads and take action accordingly. I understand that the council has reviewed its procedures, and that it has measures under way to improve communications.

Chris Ruane: As I said in my speech, one incident was reported, which was actioned by the police control centre. There were, however, another three incidents involving police officers during that morning, and the information was given to the police control centre but not to the local authorities. That is a Home Office responsibility, so may I ask my hon. Friend to comment on it? There was a lack of action on behalf of the police.

Mr. Coaker: As I have said to my hon. Friend, I shall review all his remarks today to work out whether there is anything that we must do in response to them. The point that I was also trying to make is that the lack of communication, as the coroner pointed out, is one of the key aspects that the local authorities have analysed in order to ensure that they do not happen again. It will clearly be something that the police themselves must analyse to ensure that they, too, have listened to the coroner to work out whether they need to change their practices and procedures. In trying to reassure my hon. Friend, I shall of course review his remarks to work out whether there is anything that we must do in respect

not only of north Wales, but, as he has made it clear, of the rest of the country in order to prevent any such occurrence, due perhaps to a lack of communication, anywhere else.

More generally, I know that the North Wales police roads policing unit works in collaboration with local authorities and the Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency to identify routes with collision cluster sites. A multi-agency site meeting follows every fatal collision to identify opportunities for remedial engineering work, which is exactly the sort of co-operative working that we need, and I welcome it.

From the comments that my hon. Friend, the families and the north Wales public have made following the accident, the key issue is about people working together and communicating with one another. Whenever something as terrible and awful as that event takes place, it is incumbent on all of us with responsibility to reflect on it, work out whether there are lessons to be learned and put in place, as far as we possibly can, procedures and practices to stop it happening again.

In addition to those actions, the police consider education and enforcement and tailor their activities to address the relevant features of any emerging trend. Where appropriate, "red routes" will be established, enabling local authorities and the Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency to prioritise engineering work, and the North Wales police to deploy roads policing officers to key locations for visibility and enforcement. Again, it is recognised that road safety involves a number of different agencies.

The police will fulfil their role of patrol and enforcement, and I am sure that the local authorities and others will play their part in ensuring a co-ordinated approach. North Wales police also recognises the particular vulnerability of road users who are cyclists, and in partnership with its local authorities, it is seeking to adopt the updated cycling proficiency training and test, Bikeability, which has been introduced in England with the aim of giving cyclists—children and adults—the skills and confidence they need to ride their bikes safely. North Wales police is also involved in implementing the "Safer Routes to Schools" programme.

I have been in touch with North Wales police, and I assure my hon. Friend that it will consider the coroner's observations very seriously. As I have mentioned, it has already voluntarily referred the handling of the incident to the IPCC, and the investigation is not yet concluded. When it is, the police will have to consider what it says.

I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss in more detail the points that he has raised. The key issue is for everyone with responsibility for safety on our roads to work together and communicate effectively. Although we cannot bring back those who unfortunately have gone from us, all of us, as Mr. Harland and no doubt the other families would wish, can as far as possible try to learn from that tragedy, to ensure that not only in north Wales but elsewhere, any such event does not occur again where it could reasonably have been prevented.

NHS Emergency Care

1.30 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): It is a delight to speak under your chairmanship, Miss Begg. I am pleased to have obtained a debate on this issue as it is one of the most important things facing patients and staff in the national health service. I am delighted to welcome the new Minister, especially as this is a one-to-one debate. The huge advantage of such debates is that one gets the undivided attention of a Minister for half an hour. I am pleased that the Minister could come and I thank him very much.

Miss Begg, you and the Minister will have noticed that I am sitting bang in the middle of the Chamber. My regret about the main Chamber is that there are no seats bang in the middle so I have to sit on the Opposition side. I am sure that the Minister will have noticed that I not infrequently vote with the Government on NHS issues. I regard my job as voicing the concerns of patients and staff, both of whom I am in close touch with, to help the Government to get things right. In so many ways, they have got things right in the NHS, and I am the first to acknowledge that, but we must address the problems with emergency care.

The recent Opposition day debate on access to NHS care showed that both sides of the House recognised the problems with access to emergency care. I shall divide my contribution into two parts. First, I shall address access to emergency care. Secondly, I shall suggest a long-overdue classification of hospital emergency departments so that people will know what they will get at the end of their journey.

Access to emergency care is confusing and poorly understood, especially in areas that have lost their accident and emergency department. There are at least eight options for people who are worried about a sick child, who are sick themselves or who have a wife in the late stage of pregnancy. They can do the following: dial 999; go to an accident and emergency department—if there is one; go to a minor injuries unit; go to a walk-in centre; contact their GP, but that is only possible a third of the time because GPs are only there for a third of the hours of the week; and out of hours they can call the GP out-of-hours service or NHS Direct, or drop in to a primary care out-of-hours centre.

There are many confusing ways of accessing the service. That has been brought to light dramatically by the sad case of Penny Campbell who died of septicaemia. This week's *British Medical Journal* contained a comment on that, the last paragraph of which stated:

"No one should underestimate how stressful it is to be left, as Penny Campbell was, to steer your own patient journey. Doctors can't guarantee a good outcome but they can, and should, help patients navigate their way as safely as possible through our complex and fragmented health systems."

I can also illustrate the point with a sad case in my own area. The parents of a seven-and-a-half-year-old boy were concerned about his intermittent, but very severe, attacks of breathlessness. They took him to the minor injuries unit because they were used to having an accident and emergency department; although we lost that department six-and-a-half years ago, people still access services inappropriately. It was 3 pm and, appropriately, they were referred from the minor

[Dr. Richard Taylor]

injuries unit to the GP. By the time that the boy got to the GP he was much better because his problems were intermittent. The same situation occurred the next day, but out of hours. Again the family went to the minor injuries unit, which was quite wrong. They were pointed to the out-of-hours primary care centre and as there was no one there they had to phone up to make an appointment. The triage was arguably incorrect—I cannot say any more because this is under investigation by the Healthcare Commission, save that the little boy died three days later.

Where blue light accident and emergency departments have been lost, it is crucial that people understand what is in their place and how to access that. This is likely soon to be of more widespread interest, given the threats to accident and emergency departments across the country. Every potential patient, worried parent, worried husband and so on should have only two choices. If they have an accident and emergency department, they should go to it. If they do not have one, they should ring a telephone number—it should be the same number for the whole country—that will access a standardised telephone triage system.

I have recently learned that the NHS possesses exactly such a standardised, well-proven telephone triage system under the heading of NHS pathways. I tested it out in respect of that little boy who was so sadly lost. The fourth or fifth question would have said straight away that he needed to go to hospital immediately, and that would have given him his only chance.

I am sure that the Minister is aware that the system is being piloted with the North East Ambulance Service and an out-of-hours service in Croydon. Both of the trials are about to report, and the news is looking extremely good. He will be aware of the dramatic technicolour poster that NHS pathways did about the North East Ambulance Service pilot, and the extremely encouraging results that have already emerged.

The other advantage of NHS pathways is that it not only advises the patient what to do, but transmits the information to the right provider and makes the transition to the provider appropriate and rapid. My plea to the Minister is to examine NHS pathways, to consider a roll-out of the system across the country, to try to get NHS Direct to use it—we must certainly get out-of-hours triage systems to use it—and to ensure that there is one phone number, widely known across the country, that everybody uses in these circumstances.

The spin-off is that the NHS pathways triage system is designed to be used by lay people. No longer do we lock up the nurses in their triage stations; we get them out doing nursing. I guess that they would prefer to be doing that, and they should be doing so. That is the first part of my argument, and I turn to the classification of hospital emergency departments.

Everybody, including the ambulance people and the GPs, should know what their local emergency department can do and can cope with. To know that, a definite classification must exist. The first such classification that I have come across was in Northern Ireland, whose acute hospital review group reported in June 2001. Three grades were involved. There are no arguments about the top two, although there is a difficulty in that some of the schemes call them level 1 and level 2 whereas others call them level 5 and level 4.

Let us consider the top two grades of hospital emergency department for the breadth of things with which they can cope. The first one is the major trauma unit, which is currently available in major centres. There can never be more than limited numbers of those. They will cope with everything—including, specifically, major trauma, burns, chest injuries and head injuries. That is the top level—no argument about that. Nor is there any argument about the second level, which is what we know as the standard accident and emergency department. It copes with all medical and surgical emergencies except burns, head injuries, chest injuries and cardiac injuries, which have to go to the major units. Those top two levels are well agreed.

The second level is probably under threat, largely because of specialisation and medical staffing problems. That makes level 3, the middle level, very important; that is why a tremendous amount of discussion is needed. I should like to read out the description of level 3 in Northern Ireland:

"a centre serving a smaller catchment population, operating in a managed clinical network with a level two service. The range of services available in each centre will vary according to local circumstances. They would have physicians, surgeons and anaesthetists available during the day and a full A&E service."

So far, we have gone down a slightly different route in England. What in this country are now called urgent care centres—such as those in Bishop Auckland and Hexham—have lost emergency surgery in their hospitals. Not only can they not take any surgical emergencies; they cannot take all unselected medical emergencies, although they can take a number of medical emergencies. The Royal College of Surgeons has reservations about the situation. It believes that if there are to be any medical admissions at all, there must also be full acute surgical back-up; if there is an attempt to specify the medical admissions, things may sometimes go wrong.

People wish to have as much as possible locally, and as medical emergencies are far more common than surgical emergencies, people desperately want facilities for medical emergencies near to home. Just yesterday, I was speaking to Don MacKechnie, president of the British Association for Emergency Medicine. The association too, has five tiers of emergency department. Its middle tier would be the ideal. That would keep medical admissions because there would be a 24-hour A and E service, CT scanning, critical care and adequate surgical back-up. My fear is that that may not be affordable or possible, but it is what people would like.

Recently, a lot has been said about cardiac care and stroke care. We are not yet in the ideal world of being able to offer emergency angioplasty and reboring of the arteries to everybody who has a heart attack. Until we are in that situation, it will surely be far better for paramedics to give clot-busting drugs rapidly to patients with acute heart attacks. In that way, they will get the drugs within minutes, and then go to the local hospital rather than travelling miles and miles to the nearest unit that could do the revascularisation. If reorganisation is seen as a quick fix for financial or staffing purposes, the danger is that it could go ahead before replacement facilities are ready. Such facilities must be ready before changes are made.

I have covered the top three levels. The lowest level is the minor injuries unit, led by nurses. Having lost our A and E department and got a nurse-led minor injuries unit, my area has discovered that although that unit is good for minor injuries, that is absolutely all it can cope with. That is not enough. The name is wrong; the unit has to cope with minor illnesses as well as minor injuries. The president of the British Association for Emergency Medicine agreed with that. He also agreed that the presence of a doctor in such a minor injuries unit would increase the range of patients who could be seen. That is why I am delighted that at home the primary care trust and acute hospital trust have agreed to trial a doctor at our minor injuries unit to study whether such an arrangement can be self-supporting and cut down on the people who go to the A and E department by avoiding unnecessary journeys and unnecessary admissions. That is crucial.

To conclude, there should be clear pathways for accessing emergency care and we should beware of drastic reconfigurations before replacement facilities are in place. In all reconfigurations, we should remember the needs and wishes of patients. I finish with two quotes. In 2004, Andy Black, a well known health service management consultant, wrote in the *British Medical Journal*:

"If the price of moving the complex emergency to an appropriate centre of expertise is that it is accompanied by another 9 or 10 patients who are not complex acute cases, another set of problems is launched."

I commend to the Minister the Department of Health document "Keeping the NHS local", published in 2003 and added to in 2004. At last, the document recognised that big is not always best and that patients want more, not fewer, local services. In describing the pilot sites, the document stated:

"The objective is to provide as a minimum a 'first port of call' (a service able to receive and provide assessment, initial treatment and transfer where necessary)."

That is indeed the minimum. Anybody requires a pathway; we talk about the patient journey. For a patient journey, a route map and a destination are required. At the moment, I contend that patients in areas that have lost A and E departments have neither a route map nor a firm idea of their destination.

1.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) on securing this debate. I also thank him for all his work on health, which is done in a bipartisan spirit, and for his contribution to policy formation and furthering debate. Before I move on to the hon. Gentleman's specific points, I should like to spend a moment on the national context and reflect on the transformation, in recent years, in access to both urgent and emergency care delivered by the NHS.

More and more patients in A and E departments are receiving timely access to quality care. In 2003, almost a quarter of such patients waited for more than four hours; in contrast, in the year 2006-07, more than 98 per cent. of patients were seen, diagnosed and treated within four hours of their arrival at A and E. The ambulance service and its staff also provide an excellent service day in, day out—saving lives and caring for patients.

In 2006-07, 1.3 million category A patients—those with potentially life-threatening emergencies—received a response within eight minutes. That compares with a figure of 710,000 for 2001-02. A recent patient survey showed that 98 per cent. of patients were satisfied with the ambulance service—one of the highest ratings for any NHS service. The 2006 National Audit Office report on out-of-hours care also confirmed that we are making progress towards providing good round-the-clock GP out-of-hours services. The report found that patients' experiences of such services are generally positive: eight out of 10 patients are satisfied with the service, and six out of 10 rate the service as excellent or good.

We have also put in place national quality requirements for out-of-hours providers, setting standards for the delivery of care so that patients can be assured that their clinical needs should be consistently met. Services are being provided closer to home by GP practices, pharmacies, ambulance clinicians, community hospitals, NHS walk-in centres and minor injury units, rapid response teams and new technologies. NHS Direct provides a 24-hour information service to patients. In May of this year, it recorded its best ever performance scores for access to the phone line—how quickly a call is answered—and for clinical triage.

As the hon. Gentleman said, we should ensure that when patients need to go to hospital they should go to a facility that is best equipped to meet their needs. For some patients with particular care needs, the equipment, facilities and expertise required to deliver their care safely may be provided in a more specialist centre. As Roger Boyle, the national director of heart disease and stroke, said in his recent report:

"Going via a local A and E can add a delay that can mean it is too late for the patient to benefit from the newest drugs and procedures."

I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman about how important it is for people to have straightforward information, clearly communicated, about what to do in an urgent or emergency situation and to be aware of the options available. That is all the more important given the wide range of urgent and emergency care services that are now available. People have consistently told us that they want more convenient local health and social care services. In particular, they want different services more closely integrated to meet their needs.

The NHS has made progress in that respect. When people have an urgent or emergency care need, they now have a number of access routes: they can call 999 or visit an accident and emergency department, a minor injuries unit or a walk-in centre. Alternatively, they can make a same-day appointment with their GP or call NHS Direct or their local out-of-hours primary care service. The configuration of those services will vary from place to place so that they are responsive to people's needs and take account of local circumstances. It is important that those services work closely together everywhere to provide an integrated service for the public, for example using technology to patch telephone calls through to a single assessment team.

It is important, too, that people who need to contact services by telephone need to make only one call, as far as possible. That was the hon. Gentleman's point. They should not have to repeat basic information to different providers, and nor should they be uncertain about what

[Mr. Ben Bradshaw]

number to ring. NHS Direct provides a national number that people can ring around the clock to get an assessment of the urgency of need, and works closely with other providers. Similarly, 999 is available to assess and prioritise calls and respond to emergencies.

Whichever route the patient or carer chooses to take in accessing care, they should have the urgency of their need assessed consistently and rigorously at their first point of contact with the service, and should then receive an appropriate response. I am desperately sorry about the case that the hon. Gentleman outlined that affected one of his constituents. He rightly said that it was subject to an investigation by the Healthcare Commission, so I will not make any more of that. The patient should receive an appropriate response, whether that is advice on self-care, referral for a GP appointment or an immediate emergency response, such as an ambulance being dispatched.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point to some of the promising evidence that is emerging from the piloting of the NHS pathways project in three areas. We will and must wait until we have properly evaluated those pilots, which we hope to do later this year. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further on the potential for wider use of NHS pathways, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the evidence so far is promising. We will keep him informed of the progress that we make as time progresses.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the need for clarity about the range of services that are provided for people to address their urgent and emergency care needs. In each local health care community, patients, staff and the public need to understand clearly what they can expect from urgent and emergency care services. Local services should be planned and delivered safely and effectively in a way that is responsive to people's urgent and emergency care needs, but the local NHS is in the best position to understand the needs of local health care communities and can work with them and other stakeholders to plan, develop and provide services that best meet the needs of the local population. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the role that he has played in initiating the doctor-led unit in his local hospital. We will be watching its impact and progress with great interest.

The national review announced by the Secretary of State for Health on 4 July will seek to build on recent improvements in access to services, including emergency care. I hope that under Professor Sir Ara Darzi's leadership a major focus of the review will be discussing and working with NHS staff to determine how the safest and best quality care can be provided. He has already made a promising start with the publication of his review of services in London, which was already in progress. The national review will seek to put the patient first and the public's views will be very important.

As the hon. Gentleman knows from his experience, access to emergency care is an emotive issue and it will be vital to discuss with people how the NHS can provide the best possible care and what that will mean for local services. He also mentioned another sad case, that of Penny Campbell. He will know that we have issued directions to PCTs in response to that case, instructing them to review arrangements for transferring information between clinicians, which was a contributing factor in Camidoc's failure to respond effectively to her needs. As I have said, he has a point when he says that the access to emergency and urgent care can be confusing. There will always be a slight tension between offering people choice, depending on the severity of their condition and clarity of access. We need to be clearer with people about what they should do when they have an urgent need. My officials are working on some ideas to make that simpler. He mentioned a number of such ideas, including the experience in Northern Ireland and NHS pathways.

As the hon. Gentleman says, the NHS needs to take advantage of developments in technology and medical practice. We believe that the local NHS is best placed to understand the needs of local health care communities and to work with other stakeholders to plan, develop and provide services that best meet the needs of their local population, ensuring appropriate, timely and safe access to care and ensuring that the different services that are available are clearly communicated and understood. We do not believe that there is a one-size-fits-all approach that we can impose from above.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. I hope that we agree that people need timely access to appropriate care when they have an urgent or emergency care need. Progress has been made, but we need to make more progress on some of the issues about clarity of access and proper diagnosis that lead on from the sad cases that he has highlighted. We are determined to do so. When patients contact an urgent or emergency care service, they need the most appropriate response from, the most appropriate professional at the right time, in the right place. Of course, the way in which that happens will not be the same in every area, and those planning care will have to take into account their local populations and health needs to provide the most responsive service to meet local requirements. Making the most of opportunities and medical and technological advances is also crucial. What is important is that the NHS continues to ensure that patients receive the highest standards of patient care.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 18 July 2007

[JOHN CUMMINGS *in the Chair*]

HMRC Offices (East Midlands)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Tony Cunningham.]*

9.30 am

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the concerns of my constituents about the proposed closure of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs offices in Burton-on-Trent as part of the review taking place in the east midlands. I understand the need to reassess the use of buildings that accommodate HMRC in the light of changes in working practices and in the operations of the service. However, I do not believe that centralising all work for the Nottingham-Derby area in Nottingham is the right way forward. Nor do I believe that the proposal will produce the most efficient and effective system for delivering the service in the future, or that it will be efficient or effective if long-serving, experienced staff are forced to leave because of the distance that they would be expected to travel to work.

I shall come to the likely effect on staff and on the services that they provide in some detail later, but first I want to question the inclusion of Burton-on-Trent in the review of the Nottingham, Derby and Leicester urban centres. The consultation document states:

"The offices selected for review were determined by examining all offices within a 25 km radius of Castle Meadow Nottingham and Northgate House Derby."

Burton is 21 km from Derby—almost at the limit of the criterion—but it is 47 km from Nottingham. Since the current proposal is for all the sites in the area to close and move to Nottingham, I believe that it is wrong for the Burton-on-Trent office to be included.

In their response to the consultation, staff stated:

"The original proposal lumped Burton in with Nottingham/Derby, but as the current proposal means the closure of Derby, Burton is far outside the 25 km range of reasonable daily travel and should therefore be considered as a stand-alone office."

Another reason why I believe that Burton should be treated as a stand-alone office is that the town is actually situated in Staffordshire, which is in the west midlands. The staff in Burton work with employers from throughout the whole of Staffordshire. If Burton closes, will the processing of all Staffordshire employers' returns take place in Nottingham, rather than in Burton?

I am reassured by the correspondence that I have had with HMRC that the review will take into account the effect on staff. The Burton site is unusual, in that 17 per cent. of the staff have some form of disability. Some of the disabilities are visible, but others such as irritable bowel syndrome, repetitive strain injury, poor eyesight and vertigo may be invisible. People with certain disabilities would not be prevented from travelling to Nottingham, but others would find it impossible. Staff with conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome would be unable to travel using public transport because of the lack of facilities, which would mean that they would have to make themselves redundant by refusing and being unable to relocate.

Those who need to attend medical appointments within work time would find it far more time-consuming and costly if they were to be redeployed in Nottingham. The time currently allowed for appointments that cannot take place outside working hours is up to one half the person's working day. If Burton staff were to relocate to a different area, the allowed time would not cover the travelling, appointment and treatment time required, and more people would therefore have to take sick leave to attend such appointments. For staff attending medical appointments, there would be the added cost of travel, which would not be refunded because such travel would be outside the normal standard day. Whereas now, an appointment at Queen's hospital in Burton may involve minimal time and little disruption to the work load of staff, travelling to appointments from Nottingham could reduce the office's effectiveness.

One member of staff who is registered blind would find it impossible to travel as far as Nottingham and would therefore be forced to give up her job, even though she would have little prospect of finding other work. Another member of staff, who suffers from allergic rhinitis, which causes severe vertigo, said:

"There have been occasions where I've had to be taken home because I could not walk or drive due to my vertigo. What am I supposed to do if I'm working miles from home and have a bad attack? I can't drive with a severe attack and wouldn't be able to get myself home."

Those are real concerns of valuable members of staff who are afraid for their future. HMRC in Burton is an excellent example of how an employer should accommodate staff with disabilities. It also offers flexible hours to help employees balance work and family life, which the Government strive to encourage all employers to do. It would be sad if the reorganisation resulted in a move in the opposite direction.

Around half the staff at Burton have children or elderly relatives to care for. Many have chosen to work part-time or during term time because it fits in with family commitments; indeed, 37 per cent. work part-time. In their response to the consultation, the staff said:

"The Government wants to encourage disabled people to work. We are a shining example of that in action. Closing the office and making it so much harder for us all, disabled or not, to even get to work, could see all that lost. The same goes for many of our part-time staff. Most have child-care issues, which is why they are part-time to begin with. The extra travelling time will lead to at best a reduction in the number of hours many will be able to work. The reduced working hours will lead to an increase in benefit claims which is again contrary to Government aims. The Government announced plans to assist single parents back to work. The closure of Crown House is in direct opposition to these aims."

One member of staff described her situation:

"I have worked for the Revenue for 24 years. I have always chosen to stay in the Burton location as it works with my family/work balance. I am very committed to my work and although I have seen so many changes with the way we have to work over the years, I am still proud to say I work for the Government at the Inland Revenue (now Revenue and Customs)."

This member of staff had worked full-time for 17 years at Crown house and then reduced her working hours to 27 a week when she had her daughter. Working two

[Mrs. Janet Dean]

hours fewer per day enables her to collect her daughter from school each day. She said that any move to Derby—or, if that office closed, which is probable, to Nottingham—would throw her work and home life into chaos. She would have to consider working longer hours for four days and paying for breakfast and after-school clubs.

I accept that many people have to make such arrangements, and that the Government are encouraging the development of wraparound care to enable people to get into work. Many people have to travel some way to work, but my constituents who work at HMRC in Burton have chosen to work close to home, and to work hours that suit the needs of their families. They are loyal and dedicated staff who will find their lives totally disrupted by the closure of the Burton office.

It is not just those with children who will find their lives disrupted. Many staff have the responsibility of caring for elderly relatives. They would find their tasks much more difficult if they had to relocate to Nottingham.

Some employees will find it impossible to afford the extra costs of working further away from home. Although travelling costs would be paid, there are fears that the extra costs would not be fully covered. The payments would be for a limited time only, and would be taxable. They would not cover the possible introduction of congestion charges or increased parking charges. The payment of travel expenses would also have a detrimental effect on those staff who claim tax credits due to low pay or short hours, and there would be no financial compensation for additional child care costs. Those who are able to travel will, of course, add to the problems on our roads, particularly in cities such as Nottingham, by adding to the congestion and pollution.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend spoke movingly about the effects on staff at Burton. Does she agree that similar considerations apply to Mansfield? People will have to move from Mansfield to Nottingham and then deal with the consequences for their families. More importantly, should we not be focusing on customers—people who want tax advice—and is there not a real case to keep local offices open, so that people can have direct access to public services?

Mrs. Dean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Obviously, I am concentrating on Burton-on-Trent because it is the area that I represent, but the same could be said for the other offices that face closure. It is important—I shall come to this issue later—to have experienced staff who can both deal with customers and businesses on site and visit them. People's experience of the local community is important in that regard.

Any closure of the Burton office would undoubtedly lead to the loss of experienced staff, be they those with disabilities who cannot travel, those with caring responsibilities who are unable to balance work and family life, or those who cannot afford to travel. That loss of experience would result in a poorer service for the taxpayer. Employees describe how, having devoted all their working lives to the organisation, they have gained a breadth of knowledge that is irreplaceable. That knowledge has helped staff to adapt quickly to the changes happening in HMRC. Staff are concerned that the job losses caused by closures will mean that a valuable resource is lost, and that the public will suffer because there will be a vastly inferior service.

Nearly all the staff in Burton have worked there for more than 10 years, and the majority have worked there for more than 20 years. Customers of HMRC—local employers—are also concerned about the loss of experienced and skilled staff that the closure of Crown house in Burton would result in. As I said, the employers' section for the whole of Staffordshire is in Burton. That specialist and local knowledge is of huge importance to the employers with which HMRC deals, and the loss of expert knowledge cannot be replaced by basic re-training in other locations. The loss of a quality service would directly impact not just on employers, but on their employees.

In their response to the consultation, the staff said:

> "The compartmentalisation of work into narrow processes such as the LEAN procedures has a detrimental effect on many of our customers. Post is filtered and quick work is prioritised at the expense of more complex work. In the Staffordshire area much of that more difficult work is regularly sent to us here in the Burton office due to the breadth of experience in handling PAYE and SA work."

They went on to say that there would be a loss of knowledge if staff were forced to leave because of the closures, and added:

> "Those that may be able to travel will be fed into LEAN teams, where, over time the expert knowledge they possess will be diluted by the production line style of work that caused the difficult work to be sent to us to deal with in the first place."

I am also concerned about the impact that closure would have on the compliance team at Burton, which currently goes out to business in the local area. Its knowledge of local employers will be diluted and its visits will, again, entail more travel costs.

Any closure of the Burton office would result in a worsening service for the public who need to visit the inquiry centre. I understand that there is a commitment to keep an inquiry facility in Burton. However, either it would be more costly to provide the equivalent of current services in such a stand-alone facility, or the hours that it could operate would be severely restricted.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. She has focused on the effect on employees and is now turning to some of the business issues, but does she agree that it is concerning that HMRC has not yet produced any detailed business plan regarding the savings that might be generated from this wholesale reorganisation? It will be prepared only after the consultation has been concluded and a decision has been made, which seems to be the wrong way round.

Mrs. Dean: I agree with my hon. Friend—that is obviously the wrong way round, and other issues also seem to involve putting the cart before the horse. Staff are unsure whether they should accept a move now, or wait to see whether a closure takes place—an issue that I will come to later. There are many concerns about the whole process, such as that raised by my hon. Friend.

There are five staff at the inquiry centre, including the manager, and they are backed up by staff in the main offices. For health and safety reasons, the back-office

staff will work in the inquiry centre when needed, doing their own work, not inquiry centre work. That enables the centre to remain open if, for example, someone is on holiday or sick leave, or has a day off. For health and safety reasons, there must always be two members of staff in the inquiry centre when the public are present. Crown house has its own security system that protects those who work in the inquiry centre and serves others in the building who do not work for HMRC. The danger is that if the inquiry service is to be managed with the current five staff, it would have to become part-time and reduce its hours. Alternatively, it would cost more to maintain a separate facility.

It is important that a full inquiry service be maintained in Burton, particularly because the town has a large number of people whose first language is not English. It is unusual for a town the size of Burton to have so many residents who are originally from other countries. We have a large, long-established community that originates from Pakistan. More recently, people have come to the town from Iraq and Afghanistan, and, more recently still, from Poland. Some of them have language difficulties and value face-to-face contact, rather than contact via the telephone. If we do not have a full service, those people will lose out, and as I said, maintaining the current inquiry service would cost more money.

The impact on the local economy of the proposed job losses in Burton is a further concern. Crown house is situated in the town centre, and the HMRC operates from two of the building's six floors. A job centre operates from two floors, and one floor is commercially rented. Crown house is conveniently located next to local bus services and is adjacent to the two main shopping centres. Staff based in the town spend their money there, and local shops will lose out if jobs are transferred to Nottingham. People will not just go out at lunch time in Nottingham, but will do their general shopping there, which will be a loss to Burton and its local businesses.

I draw the Minister's attention to the stress that has been placed on staff by the uncertainty that exists over the proposed closures. Although I appreciate that consultation and consideration of the proposals have been extended so that care can be taken to make the right decision, delay brings a longer period of uncertainty for staff. In the meantime, they feel pressured into making decisions about their future without knowing whether their place of employment will close. No alternative departments in Burton, or within reasonable daily travel, could take on surplus staff from HMRC. Staff are being told that if their office is to close, in the worse case scenario there will be compulsory moves, and that if someone refuses to move, they will be dismissed under the conduct and disciplinary procedures. Will the Minister say whether that is correct?

I am pleased to be able to draw the Minister's attention to my constituents' concerns. I ask her to look at the position of loyal and experienced staff who have given a lifetime of service to the Revenue. I also ask her to look at the response of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), of 5 July concerning the Kettering office, in which she stated:

"One aspect of the impact assessment that is made is the effect of travel".

She went on to say:

"All staff will have individual meetings with their managers to assess their travel requirements and to make sure that they do not affect their work-life balance."—[*Official Report*, 5 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1089.]

It is important that that happens before a decision to close an office is made. Reference has been made to the financial situation—the other side of the issue. It is no good saying that the offices are going to close and then looking at the staff's needs, because in that case some staff could not continue to be employed.

I ask the Minister to consider the situation, given that Burton-on-Trent is 47 km from Nottingham—nearly twice the reasonable travel distance, according to the consultation—and to consider whether Burton should be regarded as a stand-alone office. Will she also consider the better use of technology to avoid centralisation and the reduction of accommodation at various locations, rather than the abandonment of whole buildings, or part of them, as in the case of Crown house? It should not be beyond the wit of man and woman to devise a system in which people can continue to work in offices, albeit on reduced floor space, and use technology to do the jobs that they would have to do if they were transferred to Nottingham.

I hope that, when the Minister has considered all the issues, my constituents will be able to continue to work close to home, which will help them to balance their employment with any disabilities or caring responsibilities that they have.

9.51 am

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) on securing this important debate. Some decisions for the London area have been announced already, but in the process of reviewing these HMRC mergers and closures around the country, we were told initially that a decision would be made for the east midlands—along with other areas—in the summer. However, it is now more likely to be after the summer—we think that that means in the autumn. So great doubt still hangs over the work forces in the affected areas.

In Derbyshire—one of the five counties in the east midlands—the proposal is to close every HMRC centre and to move them out of the county. We have heard examples already of some being moved to Nottingham. In Chesterfield, which has two offices, the proposal is to close both and to move them to Sheffield. There are a number of problems with that, which those who work in the two offices in Chesterfield have split into different categories.

One of those concerns travel-to-work distances, of which we have just heard examples from Burton-on-Trent. On a map, the distance from Chesterfield to Sheffield, which both staff and customers would have to travel in order to get to the proposed Sheffield centre, might appear quite short—geographically it is—but in reality it certainly is not. One factor that has to be taken into account is that, of course, a number of people working in Chesterfield live in other parts of north Derbyshire, such as the Peak district. One member of staff that I talked to lives in Matlock in the West Derbyshire constituency. First they have to travel into Chesterfield before being able to make public transport connections to Sheffield, which would have a massive effect on calculating travel-to-work times. The same

[Paul Holmes]

would apply to many customers of the centres in Chesterfield, many of whom, we should remember, are not business men or accountants dealing with tax issues who, arguably, will have cars and be able to travel, but are pursuing issues such as tax credits and working tax credits. In some cases, they will be unemployed. Such people will not find it easy to access car transport—it is not easy to get to Sheffield anyway—or to pay the costs of public transport. The distance is one factor, and the distance on the map is a very different reality from the actual travelling distance, into which I shall go in more detail later.

Another issue concerning travel to Sheffield, whether by car or bus, is the massive congestion in the daytime, which will be the working hours of the offices. The relatively short land distance to drive is a nightmare journey, and one that I know very well. I was born and lived until I was 18-years-old in the part of Sheffield nearest to Chesterfield, and I still drive in that way every week to visit my mother. Of course, I go in during the day, quite often for media interviews and meetings as well. The road network is congested throughout the day, not just in peak travel times in the morning and at the end of the afternoon. A normal route-finder or map simply does not indicate the reality. Quite often, the key roads into Sheffield from Derbyshire are gridlocked at key times and other times during the day, which makes journeys a nightmare.

That, of course, has a knock-on effect on another Government policy, which, quite correctly, is to reduce the impact on the environment of the way we live and do business. Making those who work in the two Chesterfield offices and all of the customers and clients travel to Chesterfield on a regular basis simply adds more pollution, especially since most of that road transport, whether bus or car, will be sat in traffic jams for the greater part of the journey, churning out pollution as it edges forward, bit by bit, along gridlocked roads in Sheffield—more pollution, rather than less, despite what is meant to be the Government's overriding objective across every Department.

We heard examples from Burton-on-Trent of part-time workers. A large percentage of workers in one of the Chesterfield offices in particular are female employees working part-time. I have talked to a large number of them individually, through letters and at a public meeting, and an awful lot of them chose to work part-time specifically because they have caring responsibilities, mostly for children, but also for elderly and disabled relatives. Although it is mostly women, there are men in the same situation as well. Certainly, at one of the two offices, the majority of staff are part-time, and across the offices as a whole, part-time workers constitute a large percentage of the staff.

Again, as we have heard from examples in Burton-on-Trent, many feel that they would not be able to maintain their job if they had to work in Sheffield, with all the problems of travel and time, and getting back to pick children up from school and to look after relatives and so forth. Their jobs would be lost, as, of course, would their skills and experience, as we have heard already. Many of those people have worked for many years for HMRC in its two previous incarnations.

I have touched already on the question of business service to the community, which has been mentioned by others as well. That affects partly the service to those coming to deal with tax issues and other personal matters such as working tax credits, which are horrendously complicated and can cause huge heartache for those trying to sort out the fact that they have been overpaid or underpaid and so on. If they have to travel to Sheffield, some simply will not be able to go and others will not bother, and so will lose out even further. Businesses, such as accountants, have said that, whereas at the moment they can often go to a local office and, in a face-to-face meeting, sort out quite easily many of the problems affecting their business clients, if they have to drive on congested roads to Sheffield, the service will be much worse—it might be done more at a distance, by phone or internet. The Government want e-government, but by no stretch of the imagination is that always as effective as face-to-face meetings with those involved. In fact, often, it is less effective. So there would be a loss of service to the community—to both individuals and businesses.

That business factor is important for Derbyshire as a whole, if it loses every centre, and for Chesterfield, which has been through bad economic times in the last 20 years or so. In Chesterfield, we have just, but not quite, got back to the level of employment that we had in 1981, just before Mrs. Thatcher's Government began the slash and burn policies that wiped out almost the entire industrial base in Chesterfield—engineering and mining. In recent years, many new and small businesses have been attracted into the town, but they require a lot of interaction with tax and revenue departments in order to sort out their business affairs. The loss of all of the centres in Derbyshire and, therefore, Chesterfield would impact on local businesses in the town.

We had a very reassuring meeting some weeks ago with people from the Department who told us that no one currently working for HMRC would be expected, as a result of closures and mergers, to make an unreasonable daily journey. A reasonable daily travel time—RDT—is calculated at 60 minutes. They said that back-office work would be provided if people simply cannot move to the new offices when offices are closed. Such back-office work could be done more in their home location. They promised that a face-to-face interview facility for customers would be retained, that there would be no compulsory redundancies and that they would consider, when making their final judgments in the course of the consultation, issues such as the local economy and regeneration, and whether an area, such as Chesterfield, had suffered very badly from the economic downturn of the last 20 years, was just pulling out of that and needed the help, employment and support provided by those offices.

It seemed to me at the end of the meeting that the Government had made it crystal clear that if all the promises were kept, there was no way in which they could close both offices in Chesterfield, as they had at first proposed, because doing so would not meet any one of the five criteria. If those reassurances are to be acted on, it looks as though we can be quite optimistic about what the Government will announce on Chesterfield later this year.

However, there are question marks over the reasonable daily travel distance. We are told that no one will be expected to have an unreasonable travel-to-work time

as a result of closure and mergers, but when we go into the detail and analyse how individual people will be affected, that is not quite so reassuring. The distance from Chesterfield to Sheffield is not very far on a map, but let us say that someone goes by train. There is a very good regular service from Chesterfield to Sheffield, but they will have to walk quite a distance from the station to Concept house, which is the proposed new location in Sheffield, and quite a bit will be uphill. From the flat area where the station is, they will have to go uphill past the town centre to Concept house. If people are older or disabled, that walk will not be easy. I am thinking of both staff and clients travelling from Chesterfield and north Derbyshire.

If someone travels by car, there are serious problems. The Government figures suggest that it takes 23 minutes to go by car from Chesterfield to Concept house in Sheffield. That ignores the fact that a number of the people who work in Chesterfield and a number of the people who use the Chesterfield office as clients come from the whole area of north and central Derbyshire—they come from the Peak district and from north Derbyshire. The issue is not just a 23-minute journey from the centre of Chesterfield to Concept house, but the journey time into Chesterfield first as well. In any event, there is absolutely no way the journey can be done in 23 minutes by car in the daytime. I have driven the route many times in the past 30 years or so, so I know. If someone is travelling to work in the morning or coming home from work at the end of the afternoon, it is impossible to do the journey in 23 minutes.

People who work at the centres in Chesterfield have questioned the Department about how much faith it is placing in the internet route-finders, such as the AA route-finders, that say that the journey takes 23 minutes. The answer seems to be, "An awful lot." A member of the management of the work force change team for the Chesterfield area said that the AA route-finder was "a really good start" for the team analysis of individual journey times. Well, it is not a really good start; it is totally and utterly misleading about the journey times during the day and especially at peak travel-to-work and travel-home times.

A question that has arisen in the same vein from the London experience is whether, in the case of disputes about whether the travel-to-work times that people pull off the internet are realistic, the Department will pay for a test journey to be made by the individual, so that they can take the suggested public transport route or car route and see whether they can travel it in the given time. Initially, people were told that yes, the Department would pay for test journeys, but when they chased that up, they were given this answer in London:

"There is no departmental policy covering the reimbursement of expenses incurred whilst testing the journey to a proposed new place of work. The decision falls to the local business unit/manager's discretion."

It seems, from the negotiations that are already taking place in the London area, where decisions have been announced, that it will be very difficult to get support for a test journey, but if there is reliance on internet route-finders, that will be totally and utterly misleading and it must be abandoned.

As the hon. Lady said, everyone accepts that there is a need to rationalise the estate of HMRC; that is perfectly sensible. Previously, there were two Departments, with two separate lots of offices. Of course money can be saved for the taxpayer and better spent on other things by rationalising what is being provided. In Chesterfield, the staff themselves have said that the situation is very simple. Dents chambers, which is one of the buildings in Chesterfield, could be closed and everyone moved into Markham house, which is the other building. That is under-utilised; there is room to move everyone there from Dents chambers. If that were done, a significant percentage of the savings that are sought in terms of physical office space would be made, without all the disruption to the service to people in Derbyshire, the loss of jobs and the inconvenience to people—without all the negative consequences that we have discussed.

The announcement was to be made this summer, but now we are told that it will be at the end of the summer. I hope that that does not mean at the end of August, when Parliament is in recess and Ministers are not accessible to be questioned by hon. Members from affected constituencies. I hope that it means October, when Ministers are entirely accessible.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Kennedy) *indicated assent.*

Paul Holmes: The Minister is indicating yes from a sedentary position. I look forward to her comments at the end of the debate. Obviously, hon. Members want to be very involved at the point when the final decision is announced and in the ongoing negotiations, where necessary, on behalf of individual workers in the area affected.

10.5 am

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) on securing the debate and on the way in which she presented her arguments on behalf of Burton. I also welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister to her position, which is well deserved. We look forward to working with her again as we did when she was in her previous jobs.

I understand, as others do, the reasons for the review of office space and work force deployment, but I want to raise three issues. First, the proposal to close the Alfreton office, which is in my constituency but to which people also travel from neighbouring constituencies, cannot meet the criteria set out in the review.

Secondly, I am very concerned that although assurances were given—particularly in a debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), in which she set out all the arguments on the Chesterfield office, and subsequently—that no decisions had yet been taken and that the Minister would consider all the arguments made, in fact what is happening in the offices at the moment, certainly in Alfreton, is pre-empting those decisions. That is creating confusion for staff on what decisions they should be taking at the moment.

Thirdly, I urge my right hon. Friend to ignore completely, unless it has been changed dramatically, the summary of the consultation responses that was drawn up by HMRC staff, because it bears no relationship to the responses that certainly I and staff made. It is not a proper representation of those responses. I will return to that.

[Judy Mallaber]

As with the Burton office, it is quoted in the review that Horsefair house, which is the Alfreton office, lies well outside the 25-km radius for both the main offices in Derby and Nottingham within the urban review area and should therefore be assessed as a stand-alone office. In addition to the fact that it is well outside those boundaries, the travel distances are calculated on the basis of office-to-office distances by car, and many of the people who work at Alfreton travel a considerable distance into Alfreton before they even get going, so the distances are considerably greater than that. Those distances indicate that Alfreton should also be seen as a stand-alone office.

As has been said, the relocation would not allow staff to take journeys involving reasonable daily travel. It just is not possible for it to be reasonable daily travel if staff from Alfreton have to travel to Nottingham. Because of the nature of transport links in the rural area and from Nottingham, it is not possible to say that they could travel reasonable distances. In the submissions that I sent in—I do not know whether I shall have time to return to them—I cited a number of examples, with travel times, of staff who will simply lose their jobs because they cannot possibly travel to Nottingham, given their responsibilities and the times when they have to travel. It is physically not possible.

There has been discussion about congestion on the journey into Chesterfield for staff travelling by car. I would challenge people to try travelling in and out of Nottingham during rush hours—it is a complete and utter nightmare. Anyone travelling by car will have real problems. For people travelling by public transport, at least there is a train service from Chesterfield to Sheffield. Trains from Alfreton to Nottingham go hourly only. The Alfreton Parkway station is about 1.5 miles out of the centre of the town. It is a very difficult station for people with disabilities, and at the moment the trains are not even running, so going by train certainly creates interesting challenges. For anyone who has to time their travel to fit in with when they, for example, have to drop children off at school and pick them up, it becomes virtually impossible. If they travelled by bus, most staff would have to take more than one.

I urge the Minister to talk to the Minister who dealt with the attempt at the beginning of this Parliament to close the two medical assessment centres in Derbyshire. A lot of work was done on the travel distances involved, which showed that it was very difficult to make the necessary connections in our area. Largely as a result of the work that we did and the submissions that I made on travel connections with help from the public transport unit and individuals, the two medical assessment centres stayed open.

It must also be emphasised that staff with caring responsibilities do not have flexibility as to when they can travel. We cannot, therefore, simply say that it is a certain distance from one place to another; if the trains go only hourly, many staff in the office will almost have to leave work before they get there, and that creates considerable problems.

On individual staff, we are told that one of the criteria is that HMRC is keen to ensure that

"the degree of disruption for its staff is minimised".

We are also told:

"No jobs will be lost directly as a result of this proposal. It is expected that staff will relocate within the Nottingham/Derby urban centres."

However, the consultation document says that 47 per cent. of the staff at the Alfreton office work part-time and that 86 per cent. are women, and those are among the highest proportions in any office covered in the Nottingham, Derby, Leicester and Sheffield reviews. In a union survey of staff at the Alfreton office, 84 per cent. indicated that they had caring responsibilities.

I refer the Minister to a recent response by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), who has particular responsibility for women's issues and equality. In response to a question on 5 July, she stated:

"HMRC is committed to ensuring that women and other groups do not suffer when tax offices are closed."—[*Official Report*, 5 July 2007; Vol. 462, c. 1088.]

Given the incredibly high proportion of women, part-time workers and people with caring responsibilities at the Alfreton office—it is possibly the highest proportion in any of the offices affected by the review—it is just not possible to meet that commitment not to have an effect on women. Nor is it possible to say that nobody will lose their jobs, because these people are just not able to travel.

The equal opportunities implications of the proposals are really serious. If the proposals are applied to Alfreton, they will not meet the new gender duty on public authorities. We are talking about some of the few quality jobs in the Alfreton area that are available to women with caring responsibilities and which allow the flexibility to combine paid work and caring.

I mentioned our concern about decisions being pre-empted. Within the past fortnight, the staff responsible for face-to-face contact, who are meant to be staying so that a contact service is retained, have been told that only those who can make the commitment to covering a full contact service will be wanted. In effect, they are already being told that if they work part-time, they will not be wanted. That pre-empts the decision that will be taken and goes against what has been said about equal opportunities.

As I said, such jobs are not widely available to women in the Alfreton area; indeed, there is a lack of quality jobs generally in the area. HMRC is one of the larger employers in Alfreton. Unemployment in the area is the highest in the Amber Valley borough. The office also serves a number of neighbouring constituencies, which are also classified as deprived areas.

There are therefore serious issues in relation to equal opportunities. At the moment, I am chairing an inquiry for the Select Committee on Trade and Industry on how to implement the women and work commission proposals. We are looking, in particular, at the fact that occupational segregation leads to an equal pay divide, and that relates considerably to the number of decent jobs that are available to women. The proposals therefore have serious equal opportunities implications, and we need to take account of those.

I want to make a couple of additional points. As has been said, the proposal is that all the offices in Derbyshire should close, and the implications of that are similar to

those of the proposed closure of both the medical assessment centres in Derbyshire. The proposal has therefore created a lot of local concern about the county's economy, and there is the issue of whether Government offices are seen to provide a service in our county.

On the service issue, it is proposed to continue the customer inquiry service at a nearby venue. However, the tax office at Horsefair house has received considerable national recognition for the quality of its work and particularly for the outreach work that it has done in the past. At the moment, there is a team of four face-to-face staff, which includes full-time staff members and a part-time member who works only during term time. Of the full-time staff, one has child care responsibilities and another works a nine-day fortnight. They work their hours to fit their responsibilities, but if they are now being told that they can do those jobs only if they are prepared to work a different set of hours, they will lose their jobs. Furthermore, they currently require back-up from processing staff to provide cover, but it is proposed to move the processing staff to Nottingham. The proposals will therefore have a detrimental effect both on staff and the commitments made to them and on the service that is provided.

Given the nature of their jobs, staff in the Alfreton area are very long serving and experienced. It is easier to get other jobs in urban areas, so people do not have the same length of service or level of expertise, and that fact should also be taken into account. I am told that staff turnover at Alfreton is much lower than at larger offices, where HMRC competes with other employers, and that the average length of service at Alfreton is 20 years. There is therefore a range of arguments, which I hope that the Minister will take seriously.

I am also concerned that decisions are being pre-empted. We are told that no jobs will be lost directly as a result of the review, but that is just not true. People at the Alfreton office are being told that volunteers are still being sought to move to the strategic sites. What are staff in such offices meant to do? Are they meant to assume—those who are able to move—that there will be no jobs for them if they do not take that offer up now? That pre-empts what will happen, and staffing levels will potentially be wound down to the point where the office closes and those who cannot move will be left behind. That is causing a lot of concern.

At least one member of staff has already been told that she is pre-surplus because her work in dealing with the estate has been moved to Nottingham. That pre-empts any decision to close the Alfreton office, which we are told has not been taken.

Mrs. Dean: As my hon. Friend might be aware—this might apply to her constituents as well—one of my constituents was told:

"If you wish to await the outcome of the regional reviews, you can do so but be aware that the vacancies that exist in some of our Strategic Sites may be filled".

Judy Mallaber: Yes, I have heard similar things, but we are told that no jobs will be directly lost as a result of the review. That puts people in considerable uncertainty.

Another constituent, who works in the Nottingham offices, which are meant to carry on, has been told that the type of job that she does will in future be split across six offices, instead of seven. Again, those involved do not know whether they will be offered anything else; they have been told half a story and have been left in considerable confusion.

As I say, decisions seem to have been pre-empted. As I mentioned, management told staff who work face to face a fortnight ago that it wanted only those who can make the commitment to work the necessary hours, and that goes against equal opportunities commitments. There is therefore a great deal of uncertainty, and I am concerned that despite commitments that no decisions have been made, management is operating in such a way as to pre-empt any decisions.

I mentioned my concern about the consultation responses. As a result of criticisms at our meeting with HMRC management and staff, we were told that management would go back and look at the responses, but the consultation summary bears no relationship to the submissions that were made. On Alfreton, for example, the summary says that some staff have concerns about travelling to Nottingham, which would have "an effect" on their work-life balance. Yes, it would have an effect on their work-life balance: the work bit would go, as a number of those people just cannot travel in the way that is suggested, because of the length of the journey and the connections, which they cannot make. The summary is just a distortion of what was said. We said they would not be able to make the change. It would not just affect their work-life balance; their work-life balance is such that their commitments make it impossible.

The consultation document also contains, for some reason, a quotation—we do not know where it comes from—which is quite complimentary; it does not include the comments from people who are very critical about the effect on service. I advise scepticism in studying the consultation responses, unless there have been substantial changes. I intend to write to the Financial Secretary and send her my response again.

I have a couple of examples of the situation of people in the Alfreton office with regard to travel. I have obtained some case studies. One relates to someone who worked there 30 hours a week, enabling her to drop off her daughter at school for 8.40 am and pick her up at 3.30 pm. She does not drive, so if the office closed she would have to get the bus to Nottingham from her home in Swanwick. Incidentally the main fast bus service has just closed. We hope that we shall get a substitute service, or I do not know what my constituent will do. However, when she wrote about her situation, she said, on the assumption that the Red Arrow service would still be functioning, that her travelling time would be three hours a day. She calculated that to get her hours in she would not be returning home until 6.50 pm. She did not know whether she would be able to get a child minder, which she would have to do to cover that time.

Another example concerns a single parent who cannot drop her daughter off at the child minder's home before 8 o'clock. She cannot drive, so she would have to go by bus or catch the train, which is only hourly. There is only an hourly bus service to Alfreton from where she lives. The trains from Alfreton to Nottingham run hourly. Even if she managed to catch the 9 o'clock train from Alfreton she could not get her hours in, so, again, she would have to stop working. I have also collected

[Judy Mallaber]

examples of people with disabilities; in the case of one who is registered disabled it would not be possible to get to the Nottingham office.

There are serious difficulties about the Alfreton office. I am concerned about the proposal to close all the Derbyshire offices, and about the way in which the management is now operating, which is putting great pressure on staff to take decisions without knowing the full facts about what is to happen, and is also pre-empting decisions. I know that the Financial Secretary has a difficult job, which I do not envy her, but I urge her to take on board the points that I have made.

10.22 am

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) on securing the debate. She spoke powerfully about the impact that the proposed changes will have on her constituents, but she has also provided an opportunity for many other Members of Parliament to raise concerns about how they will affect their constituencies. I am sure that the story that we have heard today will echo not only across the east midlands but across the country, because there is widespread concern about the impact of the proposals to rationalise HMRC offices. In my constituency, office closures are proposed and the staff and the wider community are concerned about the effect that they will have.

I do not think that anyone present in the Chamber objects to the principle of what the Government have said they want to achieve. It is right that the Government should closely examine the work that civil servants do, whether for national or local government, and determine whether they are doing it as efficiently as possible, so that taxpayers can see that public services give value for money. If efficiency savings can be made, that is to be welcomed. However, there is concern about whether the savings that are being discussed will be cost-effective, and whether there will be an effect on front-line services.

We have clearly heard that staff are worried about the viability of their jobs, the difficulties that the changes will present them with in such matters as travel arrangements, and whether the consultation process was fair and representative. The result is concern that pre-emptive action is being taken, ahead of the announcement of any decisions at the beginning of the autumn; that there will be a continuing period of uncertainty; and even that what is happening is salami-slicing—the beginning, rather than the end, of a process that will cast the relevant services into even greater uncertainty. Hon. Members have spoken at length about specific staff worries, and I want to broaden out my concerns about the impact that the changes may have on such matters as the local community, government, and the individuals who use the services.

As to the possible effect on the community, hon. Members have already discussed people's views about difficulty in getting access to services or their work. People will have further to travel, and the emphasis on the distance between the two offices is not necessarily fair. In both cases, people will be travelling to the offices; there will be journeys to be made to, as well as between, those destinations. That needs to be taken into consideration, along with the difficulties that have been mentioned about the relative pros and cons of trying to make the necessary journeys by public transport—or even by car, where there is significant traffic congestion.

I am concerned about the impact that any job losses will have on job availability in deprived areas. Access to quality jobs is important to the regeneration of any area. Perhaps I may draw a parallel between what has been described today and the situation in my constituency, where the tax office jobs are critical in ensuring not only access to high-quality jobs but footfall in the town. Offices providing high-quality jobs lead to money being spent in towns every day, and the additional revenue has a beneficial impact on the town. If that effect is removed, not only jobs but spending will go from the town centres. I hope that the Government take that into account when they consider possible closures.

We have heard in great detail about the possible effect of closures on access to jobs for women, in particular. Many of the jobs are part-time and, as we have heard, are held by people with responsibilities to families as carers. Any changes will affect whether they consider remaining in their job a viable option, given all their other commitments outside work. Of course, if people must travel further, there will be an environmental impact. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) spoke clearly about the knock-on effect. I wonder what cross-departmental thinking is going on about issues such as regeneration and the impact on the environment.

It seems that there is a drive to centralise services while other Departments are talking about decentralising them, and a proposal to reduce women's access to jobs while other Departments are talking about the need to ensure equality of access to jobs—and not just for women but for disabled people and other groups. Will there be a loss of community intelligence? One of the key assets of many tax offices is their local knowledge. They know the individuals that they will speak to. If people must travel a long way, that important community connection will be lost.

As to the effect on government, the Government think that the changes will bring about efficiency savings and make greater resources available. Will the Financial Secretary elaborate on the contribution that she thinks the changes will make to the Gershon review? What impact will they have on wider plans to decentralise jobs, and on local revenue collection? Of course, there is a detection and deterrence element to the work, and a cost-benefit analysis needs to be done, taking into account the cost of providing the jobs and the benefit that they provide by bringing additional taxation revenue into the Treasury. Does the Financial Secretary expect that evasion may increase and the Treasury's ability to detect it may decrease as a result of some of the changes?

I also want to ask the Minister about equality. Have the Government made any assessment of the impact that these decisions will have on women's access to the workplace? What will happen to the people in Burton, where there is a high level of disability employment? Will that change as a result of the proposals? There is undoubtedly massive excess office capacity on many of these sites, and of course there is a need for rationalisation, but I wonder whether the scope for capital savings will be matched by similar revenue savings.

The theme that comes out of the debate is that people's interaction with the state is increasingly expected to be faceless and done on the internet or by telephone. For many people that is absolutely fine and is the most convenient and straightforward way of doing things, but what happens when the choice is taken away? Some people, when they have a serious problem, are reassured by being able to sit down with an individual who is empowered to take a decision about their case and who they know has a personal interest in it. That is important, and there are concerns that that aspect will be lost, because it will become increasingly difficult to have that interaction under the changes.

Increasing numbers of my constituents come to my surgeries about problems with the Child Support Agency, the tax credit office and other Government agencies. People go to their MP in absolute frustration that they cannot speak to an individual in person to sort out their problem, or even speak consistently to the same individual on the phone. They go to their MP because it is their only opportunity to have a face-to-face interaction with the state on an issue that is affecting their lives, often in a massive way. I currently have the odd case regarding the local tax offices, but not many. I am concerned that we will not see the impact of the changes until further down the line when, suddenly, in addition to the tax credit and Child Support Agency cases that come in, we will see individuals who are having problems with their tax assessment, who would previously have been able to talk through their problems face to face with an individual but have lost that opportunity.

I understand that a face-to-face presence is to be maintained in many offices, but there are concerns that the changes will be the beginning of a process, not the end, and that we will see what we have seen with jobcentre closures: first, staff numbers are reduced, then opening hours are reduced and then, all of a sudden, we see a proposal for closure. We need reassurances from the Minister that that will not be the case in these areas.

I conclude by asking the Minister a few more questions. What work is being done at a cross-departmental level and with local authorities regarding spare office capacity and the need to provide services at a local, community level? Are they considering providing a variety of local services to make the most efficient use of work space and maintain a local presence? What was the decision-making process about where to centralise? Back in May, the *Derby Evening Telegraph* described a process whereby a circle was drawn around Nottingham and everything within that circle was drawn in. Is that what happened and was any account taken of local transport options? I have already raised my concerns about the salami-slicing approach. Will the Minister estimate the likely overall cost savings? Has there been a cost-benefit analysis of the savings represented by the job cuts balanced against the revenue that will be forgone as a result of the cuts?

Members of staff and the wider public are uneasy about the climate of uncertainty regarding the proposed closures, and the hon. Member for Burton has done her constituency a service in securing the debate. This is an opportunity for the Minister to provide greater certainty, and everyone will be pleased to hear further reassurances that the consultation process will have an impact on the results and on the autumn proposals.

10.34 am

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mr. Cummings. I think that this is the first time I have spoken in this Chamber with you in the Chair—I am more used to the hon. Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) being in the Chair. I congratulate her on securing this very useful debate and on the passion and understanding that she showed in setting out her case. She put the perspective of the staff who work in Burton very strongly, and spoke in particular about disabilities and work-life balance, which other hon. Members have mentioned.

We must all acknowledge, as some hon. Members have, that it is incumbent on HMRC to organise its affairs in the most efficient manner possible, and that there is a place for rationalisation where it has additional office capacity. I should like to address more fully a point that the hon. Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) made in his intervention, which was not discussed in great detail, about customer services. I am not entirely sure about calling taxpayers "customers". I know that we all use that term, but I am not sure that they all feel like customers when their tax is taken from them.

This is a big issue in the east midlands. Hon. Members have pointed out that the programme stretches across the country, and there have been previous debates on how it will affect Cornwall and Kettering. However, feelings are strong in the east midlands, with which I include Staffordshire, even though it is in the west midlands. The *Derby Evening Telegraph* has been very vigorous in defending the existing tax offices through its "Hands Off Our Taxmen" campaign.

The reorganisation is driven partly by a desire to find efficiency savings. There are targets to reduce the number of staff in HMRC, which were driven by Gershon and, subsequently, the Lyons report. We must consider the matter carefully. It is entirely reasonable for Parliament to scrutinise whether the service to the "customer" is being maintained. Last December, the former Paymaster General answered a parliamentary question about the impact of the tax office closure programme on the administration of tax credits and employer end-of-year returns. She began her reply by stating:

"HMRC do not have a tax office closure plan."

I think that we know different now. She went on:

"The reorganisation aims to improve both efficiency and customer service in all areas of HMRC."—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2006; Vol. 454, c. 1744W.]

That is clearly a welcome objective, but we must ask whether it is being achieved.

When I was preparing for this debate, I looked at the evidence given to the Treasury Select Committee on 25 April by a number of experts in the field. Frank Haskew, head of the tax faculty at the Institute of Chartered Accountants, said that he was

"very concerned about HMRC's cost reduction programme and efficiency savings and that it is too much of a task for HMRC to actually improve services."

The institute, which deals with tax offices on a day-to-day basis, has surveyed its members and found that 65 per cent. of respondents feel that the HMRC merger has not improved services. It also found—this is particularly relevant to the debate—that 71 per cent. feel that centralisation has gone too far, and that 79 per

[Mr. David Gauke]

cent. feel that the lack of HMRC offices and contacts is making their job much harder. That important point was made by the hon. Members for Burton and for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy). People want to be able to speak to somebody directly—to be able to sit down and have a face-to-face meeting. When tax credits were designed, the intention was that there would be an opportunity to have such meetings. When dealing with the state as a whole, there is a desire for such an approach.

The hon. Member for Burton raised some local issues, including the fact that a lot of people in Burton do not speak English as their first language. Having done a little research in this area, I know that four of Burton's wards are among the 10 per cent. most deprived in the west midlands.

East Staffordshire borough council has recently shown its desire to speak to people by establishing a customer service centre in Burton. In the first three weeks, about 1,500 people visited it. I am grateful to Andrew Griffiths, the excellent Conservative parliamentary spokesman for Burton, for drawing this to my attention. A desire to speak to people clearly exists.

John Whiting of the Chartered Institute of Taxation raised a concern with the Treasury Committee about the loss of experience within HMRC. He said that it was harder for people to get good interaction with someone who could answer their questions. A consistent message is coming back: routine problems such as VAT registration and trying to check whether coding notices have been issued are taking longer to resolve. Previously, such matters would have been dealt with by a quick telephone call or a quick visit. It is a great concern that the quality of service provided by HMRC is not what it should be—indeed, it appears to be declining in many instances.

Tax credits are one of a handful of recent particular stresses on HMRC. I am only going to touch on them now, but I am sure that it will not be the last time that I debate them with the Financial Secretary. We saw the report last week from the National Audit Office, produced along with HMRC's annual accounts. One of the many concerns raised in it was that the level of fraud and error in 2004-05 was unacceptably high, and there was no evidence to demonstrate a lower estimate for subsequent years. One problem identified by Sir John Bourn of the NAO was the quality of the inquiry work undertaken by HMRC. Does the Financial Secretary think that the removal of local offices will have any impact on the inquiry work undertaken by HMRC to identify fraud and error?

Another subject that we debated at some length during consideration of the Finance Bill, particularly on Report, was VAT issues, particularly delays in VAT registrations and repayments. Again, that is not a new issue, although it may be for the Financial Secretary. There is considerable concern about HMRC delays within this process, and Paul Gray, its chairman, acknowledged the problem in January. There is a recognition of what we hope is a temporary blip in performance. None the less, we are seeing considerable delays in the time that it takes to register a company for VAT and to make a VAT repayment.

I should acknowledge that many of the problems are occurring because of legitimate attempts to tackle missing trader intra-community fraud. I do not want to put any pressure on HMRC to fast-track processes and not go through the necessary checks, but there is a wider issue. Resources appear to be diverted into tackling that fraud, leaving insufficient resources to deal with routine matters.

I return to income tax and the NAO report issued last week. It seems that HMRC may not be pursuing some £880 million of tax due, and that there is about £340 million in overpaid tax. The report states:

"potentially five million taxpayers not paying the right amount of"

—income—

"tax."

That is clearly a concern.

The Public and Commercial Services Union, which deals with this area, has stated:

"The programme of office closures and job cuts will potentially have a devastating impact on jobs, conditions and the delivery of public services, particularly in areas where service delivery is already impeded by inadequate staffing."

It also says:

"Morale has reached a new low".

One of the points made by the trade union is that, given the various staff reductions, HMRC may be

"employing thousands of staff on short-term, temporary contracts and using overtime (at an additional net cost to the Government) in an effort to try to cope with backlogs of work."

I would be very grateful if the Financial Secretary shed light on whether that is true.

We can see that HMRC will have a very tight budget for the next few years, and that there will be some fairly ambitious attempts at reorganisation. Doing all this at once creates certain strains. We must ask ourselves whether HMRC is coping and whether its customers are suffering. We have also heard important points about the impact on communities and on staff, and it is right that we address all these issues. My concern is that the then Chancellor perhaps sought to have a very tight spending round, and wanted to lead by example. In doing so, has he caused a problem in our tax system that will create problems in raising revenue, and for taxpayers and staff?

10. 47 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Kennedy): It is a pleasure to be debating this subject under your chairmanship, Mr. Cummings. For once, it is not raining, so hopefully the day will continue to go well. I am pleased to have been able to listen to the concerns that were expressed, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean) on securing the debate and, as has been said, on enabling a number of other colleagues to speak on this subject, which is of clear importance to the neighbourhoods that they represent.

I also appreciate the way in which hon. Members have expressed their acceptance of the need for the current review. I know that they will appreciate that, following the merger of the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise, the department has significantly more office accommodation than it needs. The position varies across the regions, but in general HMRC believes that it has about 40 per cent. more office accommodation than it

needs to support its operations. It estimates that this spare capacity costs about £100 million a year to maintain. The annual cost of accommodation in the urban centres of Nottingham, Derby and Leicester to the department is about £12 million. I am glad that my hon. Friends have agreed that the board has a responsibility to reduce unnecessary cost.

In a thoughtful and probing speech, the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Gauke) raised a number of issues. He is right that the challenges facing HMRC are not easy. I would like to say one or two things on the issue of tax credits, which he mentioned. He also quoted from evidence to the Treasury Committee, and raised concerns that were expressed by representatives of tax advisers or agents. I acknowledge that the agent community may require specific services, as do other members of the public, from HMRC. HMRC is piloting a dedicated agents' hotline to see whether it meets those needs. However, I am sure that we will discuss this issue again on other occasions.

Similarly, the hon. Gentleman questioned whether we had the balance right, whether HMRC was being asked to do too much and what impact that might have on levels of service. I recognise that some difficulties exist. HMRC is working to recover the position on VAT, and working on the speed with which VAT registrations and returns are processed. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be reassured that we have ring-fenced resources for tax credits. Transformation of the process seeks to address some of the problems, and to improve the level of service as part of the efficiency programme. HMRC aims to deliver an effective and efficient service focused on the needs of its customers—I prefer to call them customers rather than claimants, as we do with some tax credit claimants. Those improvements cannot be achieved by continuing to occupy buildings that are no longer needed, and carrying out work in ways that are no longer efficient.

Very little of HMRC's current work in its local offices relates to economic activity in the local area in question. Its business is arranged on national business lines, including the use of large contact and processing centres, with the exception of its inquiry centre network—I shall return to that—and locally based compliance and debt management activity. It is important that HMRC uses its larger centres as efficiently as possible, and it has embarked on a transformation programme that will allow it to deliver its business with up to 25 per cent. fewer staff. A number of jobs will go over time, but it is the process by which HMRC achieves those improvements and efficiencies that we are discussing.

Beyond that, HMRC is making significant changes to the way in which it carries out its business to respond to customer demand. Many customers now choose to use the telephone, or the internet to file returns and make claims. It is right for senior management to look at all operations to ensure that they are run as efficiently as possible. In some work areas, that need is best served by concentrating work in larger units where the processes can be streamlined. In other areas, a more mobile work force is seen as the best solution to meet customer needs. Finally, there must be an emphasis on improving compliance by matching resources to the risks that HMRC deals with in particular locations.

I shall now deal with a couple of general points. The hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) asked what contribution the closure will make to the Gershon recommendations. HMRC is aiming for ongoing savings of £507 million per annum by 1 April 2008. The hon. Lady suggested that we were salami-slicing services, and asked whether there would be more change in the future. There is nothing more certain than that there will be more changes. HMRC transformation will continue over a number of years, and it is likely that, as customer needs and processes change, decisions will be revisited.

The hon. Lady made a throwaway comment about changes at jobcentres, Jobcentre Plus and so on, and some of the associated traumas. When I was Minister for Work a few years ago, I rejoiced when an unemployment benefit office in my constituency was closed—I had signed on there 20-odd years ago—and put up for sale. It was looking rather sad and dilapidated, and it is now being made ready for redevelopment for a totally different purpose. I asked my agent whether I could pose in front of it for a photograph for a leaflet, because it is excellent that the strength of the economy and the greater number of jobs mean that we can consider with equanimity some of the changes that, at other times in our country's history, have been much more problematic.

HMRC is ahead of schedule with its general efficiency programme, having reduced the number of posts by some 11,000 through a combination of restricted recruitment and voluntary early retirement. I emphasise that the plan is to reduce its use of office accommodation and to focus on back-office functions, not public inquiry facilities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo), who served for a long time at the Treasury and is an extremely hard act to follow, made it clear that the network of inquiry centres must be maintained. I want to assure my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping) that I fully endorse that approach. HMRC will not change that approach in any way.

When an inquiry centre is to close—for example, because a lease cannot be renewed—HMRC has been asked to re-provision the facility as close as possible to the current inquiry centre. Face-to-face contact will be maintained, and in many cases it will be enhanced.

Mrs. Dean: If a back office closes, will the inquiry office be open for as long as it is now, and will increased staffing be necessary to fulfil that?

Jane Kennedy: In line with the assurances that I have given and the steer that was given to HMRC by my predecessor, the face-to-face services that the public receive through those offices should be maintained and, wherever possible, enhanced. I cannot predict too far into the future the specifics of what may happen in a particular office, but I assure my hon. Friend that the current level of services will be maintained.

Mrs. Dean: Does my right hon. Friend accept that, in order to maintain the number of hours that an office is open to the public if a back office closes, it will be necessary to employ more face-to-face staff?

Jane Kennedy: I do not want to pre-empt anything that might come out of the consultation and review, but where those considerations are being made, my

[Jane Kennedy]

hon. Friend is right. I will look to the professionals charged with responsibility for managing the decisions for the details. Her point is sensible, and such considerations will be taken into account. I hope that I have reassured her, without going too far into the details.

The new department has been asked to draw up plans to improve services and to reduce costs over the next five years. The Government will invest significantly in each of those years to improve HMRC services.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) has asked on a number of occasions about the detailed business case. HMRC's business case is predicated on improving services for customers by re-engineering its processes; strengthening compliance—those who have had concerns about the compliance effort should be reassured—achieving efficiencies that, in part, will release the 25,000 posts that I mentioned; and releasing up to 40 per cent. of excess estate, which is costing more than £100 million. While the impact assessment may reflect the costs of a single building and the likely cost of staff moving, it cannot cover each of the national savings noted above.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton asked about the effect of job cuts and local office closures, and expressed her concerns about compliance yield and local knowledge. That issue was raised in an Adjournment debate last week. There is no question but that local knowledge is important for compliance work, but the local compliance presence does not always need to be quite as local as it is now. Co- locating teams from former Inland Revenue and former Customs and Excise will enable them to work more effectively, and HMRC can continue to protect revenue by greater assessment of risk and the use of intelligence.

As my hon. Friend and others are aware, HMRC has designed a systematic approach of review, consultation and announcements on decisions. It is amazing how time flies, and I am aware that my time is coming to an end. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) that I will take account of all the submissions that have been made, including representations in this debate, before any decisions are made. We are caught between a rock and a hard place. I do not want to make an announcement—I have not had any advice on this—before the end of term, and no announcements will be made until the House resumes, so that hon. Members have an opportunity to comment.

During the remaining seconds, may I say that, as a former trade union official, I compliment the managers charged with taking forward these changes on the care that they are taking to ensure that individual members of staff, whose concerns my hon. Friend rightly raised, are dealt with as fairly as possible?

Forest Protection

11 am

Barry Gardiner (Brent, North) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Governments of Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Indonesia signed an important declaration on the "Heart of Borneo" initiative. Those three countries have one conservation vision, recognising the importance of their island, as they refer to it, as "a life support system". The initiative involves voluntary trans-boundary co-operation that is based, as they declare, "on local wisdom" and "on sustainable development principles". As such, the declaration brings together two agendas that have for far too long been kept apart. It may have been convenient for non-governmental organisations and Governments to separate developmental issues from environmental ones, but in truth they represent one agenda. Environmental sustainability will not happen if in order to achieve it we ask the world's poor to sacrifice economic growth and development. Equally, development that is not environmentally sustainable undermines its own foundations, as the Stern report recently highlighted.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister recognises that point, and I welcome the fact that his previous boss as Secretary of State for International Development, our right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Hilary Benn), has now taken over as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, strengthening further the links between the two Departments. Our right hon. Friend worked tirelessly on the issue of combating illegal logging in Indonesia. The "Heart of Borneo" declaration expresses that common environmental and developmental agenda in the following way:

> "With one conservation vision and with a view to promote people's welfare, we will cooperate in ensuring the effective management of forest resources and conservation of a network of protected areas, productive forests and other sustainable land-uses within an area which the three respective countries will designate as the 'Heart of Borneo (HoB)', thereby maintaining Bornean natural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations".

I have worked closely with two of the three Ministers who signed that declaration—Minister bin Khalid from Malaysia and Minister Kaban from Indonesia—and in relation to Indonesia I want to put on the record today my admiration for just how far that country has moved since 1998 and the days of corruption under the Suharto regime, when the country was a kleptocracy. Today, it is a country putting in place protections under the law for its people and its quite extraordinary biota.

The island of Borneo is the third largest in the world, after Greenland and New Guinea, covering an area twice the size of Germany. Whereas Germany might boast approximately 2,700 different higher plant species, however, one mountain alone in Borneo, Mount Kinabaloo, has almost double that figure. The island as a whole registers more than 15,000—diversity as great as that in the whole of Africa.

Over the past 10 years, entirely new species to science have been discovered at a rate averaging three every month. That is true riches. It is based upon the rainforest, but it is worth immeasurably more as the basis for new drugs against cancer. There is the shrub that produces CBL316, a powerful new anti-cancer agent, and the compounds, calanolides A and B from the bintangor tree, which are effective against various strains of HIV. The forest also performs more mundane services for the

local population, stabilising the climate, controlling soil erosion and regulating the supply of clean water. Those eco-system services are simply the essentials of life for 20 million people living on the island.

For the past decade the world has become progressively more aware of the importance of such services, of forests as carbon sinks and of their role in combating climate change. Deforestation is known to contribute approximately 20 per cent. of global greenhouse gas emissions every year, and for that reason illegal logging and oil palm plantations have recently been a focus of concern for the international community.

My hon. Friend the Minister well knows of my concerns in that area, but today I shall raise with him an equally serious threat to the Indonesian forest—that of open-cast coal mining. He will know from the work that his Department is doing with Indonesia in concluding a forest law enforcement, governance and trade voluntary partnership agreement, that the new, democratic Indonesian Government took commendably swift action to protect their remaining forests following the overthrow of the Suharto regime. On 30 September 1999, the Government enacted laws giving protected forest status to many of the remaining highland and key watershed areas. Included in that protected forest status were five out of seven concessions that the giant Anglo-Australian company BHP Billiton had, shall we say, secured under the Suharto regime.

Forestry law No. 41 of the statute book of the Republic of Indonesia in the year 1999 No. 167, addition to the national statute book No. 3888, clause 38, sub-clause 4 strictly states that open-cast coal mining is prohibited in protected forest areas. Having already invested approximately $40 million in exploring the potential of those concessions, BHP Billiton was not going to see them rendered effectively worthless without a fight. Along with a number of other companies, BHP Billiton lobbied to have the concessions reinstated. It did more than lobby: it threatened to bankrupt the fledgling democratic Government by launching legal proceedings to demand compensation. The new Parliament first refused to buckle, but that group of foreign companies applied significant international political pressure.

Questions to the Australian Senate have revealed a series of meetings at Australia's Jakarta embassy, where BHP Billiton's Andrew Wilson took a leading role. Those strategy meetings led directly to meetings between the Australian ambassador and a number of key Indonesian Ministries to press the companies' financial interests over the communities' national laws to protect their unique ecosystem. Eventually, Indonesia's new President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, submitted a perpu overruling Parliament. The Indonesian constitution is quite clear that it is for Parliament to enact the laws. The President, under clause 22(1) of the constitution, has the power to issue a decree or Government regulation in lieu of a law, only when the country is in the grip of a national crisis. The national crisis in that case was the threat that BHP Billiton and other companies would bankrupt the new democracy by suing at international arbitration for $22 billion.

Whether that threat was real or not, it was effective. The perpu specified that the 13 companies' forest area mining permits, which predated forestry law 41 of 1999, should remain effective for their originally intended span. The constitutional court considered a challenge to the perpu, and it found that under Indonesian law a concession or contract of work is granted to a mining company to exclude others from mining in a certain area, and that it does not comprise a permit for exploitation. A company holding a contract of work may carry out exploration, but it gains a licence for exploitation only when its mining plan and environment impact assessment of a particular site have received Government approval.

Ultimately, the constitutional court ruled that when six companies that are still at the stage of exploration or of feasibility studies enter the exploitation stage, they must comply with the requirements in clause 38(4) of forestry law 41 of 1999, which prohibits open-cast mining in protected areas. Hence, six of the 13 companies listed in the presidential decree are prohibited from open-pit mining in protected forest.

None of the five BHP Billiton concessions in the heart of Borneo benefited from the 2004 perpu. To safeguard its investment in those coalfields, BHP Billiton required another way to secure the right to exploit them. The Maruwai coalfield is today represented on the BHP Billiton website as a contract of work for a deposit area measuring

"120 km by 60 km in a remote and isolated area that lies largely within the province of Central Kalimantan. The mining of the resource will see the development of infrastructure over a much wider area."

The website says that the coal deposits contain a

"mid-volume hard coking coal resource which in stage 1 of the development will support the production of at least 1 million tonnes per annum (mpta) of coal. In stage 2, up to 5 mpta will be produced, potentially for up to a 20-year period. The Maruwai project is currently in a feasibility study phase which is aiming to bring online the stage 1 mining of the Lampunut deposit by the second half of 2008...This was due to its ability to be mined by open cut methods, its proximity to navigable rivers and its coal quality."

It is no surprise that at the end of last year, new guidelines were issued for temporary use of forested areas. Under chapter 1 of Forest Regulations 14/mehut ii/2006, any forest

"which is considered 'unsuitable' for logging use can be considered for a change of status"

under a land swap or financial compensation deal. The acquired forest can be used for strategic purposes that include mining.

However, as far as the Maruwai coalfield and BHP Billiton are concerned, those convenient regulations contain a potentially fatal provision. Chapter 2(4)(2) of the regulations states that

"in protected forest, open cast mining is not permitted."

Despite a presidential decree, a constitutional court case and a change in the regulations, BHP Billiton was left with the unfortunate result that the Maruwai coalfield could not be open-cast mined because it was inside a designated protected forest area in the heart of Borneo—thwarted by lines on a map, it seemed, until the maps themselves changed.

I have copies of documents, which I will happily make available to the Minister, showing BHP Billiton's success in making approximately 20,000 hectares of protected forest disappear from official maps. So proud were the company's staff of their two revisions of the maps that they boasted in a memo:

"Judge our success by the lines on the maps."

[Barry Gardiner]

What tools they used to bring about the changes I do not know—I can guess that it was more than an ink eraser. However, block Lampunut, the first stage of the exploitation, comprises 7,721 hectares, almost all of which used to lie within protected forest areas. Now, not a single hectare is shown to lie within such areas. The forest has simply disappeared from the maps.

Will the Minister give me a simple reassurance that he will ask his officials to raise the issue with their counterparts during their discussions about the forest law enforcement, governance and trade voluntary partnership agreement? In concluding a VPA under which UK and European taxpayers' money will be used to improve forest governance, it is of the utmost importance to obtain clarity and stability in relation to the protected forest areas being discussed. It cannot be right that FLEGT agreements should be based on shifting sands.

I have laid substantial charges at the door of BHP Billiton, but I wish before closing also to lay an olive branch. The company acquired another licence in 1999—not in Indonesia, but from the inspector of mines in Sweden, in accordance with that country's Minerals Act, to exploit the Manek area. The area is only 4 km from the Sarek national park, part of the Laponia world heritage site. The eastern part of the area is important to the Sami people, and the issuing of the permit resulted in three separate appeals. In that instance, BHP Billiton engaged in intensive consultation and ultimately decided to relinquish its exploration licence.

That was the right decision, not only for the Sami people but for BHP Billiton, which enhanced its reputation with the Sami and has now secured alternative drilling programmes in Sweden as a consequence. I cite that case in the belief that it could be a precedent for the heart of Borneo. I recognise that Sweden is a developed nation with a much longer legal tradition of land and property rights, but BHP Billiton professes to care not just about having a green image but about the environment.

Later this year, the world's spotlight will fall on the Indonesian island of Bali as world leaders meet at the United Nations framework convention on climate change conference of the parties to discuss climate change issues and how to create financial mechanisms to avoid deforestation. They will meet in the same hotel that hosted the Coaltrans Asia conference last month, where BHP Billiton representatives gathered to be told that Indonesian coal production would steam ahead unfettered. The two conferences could not represent two more different futures for the heart of Borneo or for our planet.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Gareth Thomas): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Barry Gardiner) on securing this debate. It is entirely appropriate for me to acknowledge his considerable record of interest and activity in this policy area during the past 10 years. I look forward to continuing to work with him in his new role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for forests.

My hon. Friend explained eloquently why forests in general, and the forests of Borneo in particular, are so important. He described changes in Borneo, many of which are recent and the result of considerable external influences, and many of which have occurred in the past 25 years.

The first major influence was the transmigration scheme, which brought people from Indonesia's overcrowded islands to make a better living in Borneo. That created the infrastructure that opened up the island to logging on a grand scale to feed international markets. The rewards were considerable although, as my hon. Friend knows only too well, not everyone shared in them.

Anyone travelling up the Melawi river in west Borneo a generation ago would have marvelled at a landscape that had changed little in centuries. I am told that a traveller making the same journey today will find a very different world. There are still a few patches of good forest, but much of the more accessible land has been cleared of trees. Since the big logging companies arrived, the area has suffered a large reduction in game, wild fruit and many of the plants that local people have traditionally harvested from the forests. If one asked the villagers whether they were financially better off as a result of logging, there would be a mixed response. Some have earned a wage working for logging companies, but for many people logging has brought few lasting benefits.

There are similar stories in West Papua province, to the east of Borneo, where the Knasaimos people of Seremuk first felt the impact of illegal logging in 2002. It destroyed the livelihoods of many in the area and the social structure of many villages. However, illegal logging was stopped as a result of a crackdown by the Government in 2005, which helped local people take back control of their forests. They were able to map their land, measure their trees and work out a strict harvesting quota that would keep the forest healthy and productive. Unlike the logging company, they knew how to leave unharmed the sago palms and other plants on which they depend.

My hon. Friend rightly described the costs of logging and associated land clearing, which have led to an almost irretrievable loss of biodiversity in many parts of the world; to the loss of future livelihood opportunities that sustainable management of forests, rather than their liquidation, might have brought; to the release of enormous quantities of greenhouse gases that put Indonesia in the first division of the world's emitters; and to air pollution that has damaged health and disrupted daily life and business in Borneo and neighbouring countries.

I join my hon. Friend in saying that the "Heart of Borneo" is a bold initiative. We in the Government welcome it, and congratulate the Governments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei on their vision. It is only right that we should also congratulate the WWF and the other non-governmental organisations that are helping turn the vision of the "Heart of Borneo" idea into practical action. As my hon. Friend said, the initiative comes at a time when pressures on the remaining forests of Borneo are growing and when there is a greater awareness than ever of the benefits of conserving forests in respect of mitigating climate change. We have the campaigning work of my hon. Friend and others and the Stern review to thank for that.

That awareness brings closer the prospect of payments for reduced emissions from deforestation. That could help tip the balance of incentives in favour of keeping

forests standing, rather than cutting them down. To help realise that potential, the British Government will build on the momentum created by the Stern review and the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, when Chancellor in October 2006, on mobilising international resources for sustainable forest management.

So far, we have committed £50 million to protect forests and people in the Congo basin as part of the £800 million environment transformation fund, and we will play our part in the arrangements that follow the United Nations climate negotiations in Bali in December. The Department for International Development, the International Finance Corporation, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and others have joined efforts to develop financing instruments, such as eco-securitisation, that will channel private investment into the sustainable management and conservation of forests such as those of Borneo.

As my hon. Friend said, the meeting in Bali will be an important event for forests. Our aim is to reach international agreement on the use of the carbon market for the second commitment period under the Kyoto protocol, after 2012, to give positive incentives to reduce emissions from deforestation. At the Heiligendamm summit, the G8 invited the World Bank to use the forest carbon partnership facility to develop the capacity of developing countries and to pilot approaches to reduced emissions from deforestation.

Indonesia is already moving in that direction, and the UK is providing help. For example, we are providing money and expertise to help the country develop the technical and institutional requirements to participate in payments for reduced emissions from deforestation, to conduct market analyses of prospective buyers of emissions reductions and to develop a portfolio of reduced emissions projects. We are also helping to establish an international framework that can help reduce deforestation. That is just one of the many ways in which we contribute to the aims of the "Heart of Borneo" initiative.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the Darwin initiative has funded considerable scientific research and capacity building in Indonesia and Malaysia. Some 16 projects, with a total value of £2.75 million, are under way at the moment. With others across Whitehall and the European Union, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working to develop social and environmental standards for biofuels. Right hon. and hon. Friends at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are funding the "Heart of Borneo" implementation plan that will engage key stakeholders in planning future activities and identifying long-term roles and responsibilities.

As my hon. Friend said, DFID has been supporting forestry in Indonesia for the past 15 years. In recent years, our focus has been on helping improve conditions for forest reform. We have worked with civil society and Government organisations, through small grants and facilitation, to broker new relationships between citizens and the state. That has begun to transform forest policy making in Indonesia. As my hon. Friend said, marginalised groups now have a stronger voice and the state is responding with new policies and programmes. In turn, that is resulting in more livelihood opportunities and better environmental management.

As my hon. Friend will know, the Stern review recognises that clear property rights and better governance are fundamental to the avoidance of undesirable deforestation. Clear property rights are a precondition for investment in the management and conservation of forests. Where governance is weak and tenure unclear, powerful interests can capture forest resources and prejudice the interests of others. We need to accelerate the tenure and governance reforms that will deliver better outcomes for forests and people.

Evidence from around the world suggests that the time for that is now right. In 2006, Brazil, China, Indonesia, India, Russia and other countries announced reforms, and we will do more, across Government, to help those reform processes.

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his response. In the few minutes that remain, will he simply give an assurance that his officials will raise two issues with officials from Indonesia? The first is the provision for land-swap arrangements that were introduced at the end of last year and the lack of clarity that they entail in the areas of protected forest. The second is the basis on which revisions to maps are agreed and publicised.

Mr. Thomas: I was coming on to say to my hon. Friend that as he rightly described, the European Union is currently negotiating forest law enforcement, governance and trade partnership agreements with Malaysia and Indonesia. They will provide the future framework for our collaboration with those countries on matters of forest governance.

I shall take up the issues raised by my hon. Friend with the European Union so that it can be part of EU discussions with Indonesia. My hon. Friend is right to describe the expansion of open-cast mining in Borneo as a significant threat, which comes not only from the removal of the forest to get at coal, but from the infrastructure of settlements and roads associated with large-scale open-cast mining. I have no doubt that that subject will be very much in the minds of representatives of all three Governments when they meet tomorrow in Brunei Darussalam to agree on the boundary of the "Heart of Borneo" and, more generally, the timetable for tri-country plans.

As my hon. Friend knows, the UK has been working with Indonesia since 2002 to help improve governance and tackle illegal logging. As he will know only too well, it has not been easy, although we have seen a lot of progress, particularly in the past two years, and illegal logging has been greatly reduced. There is still considerable smuggling of logs across the border between Indonesia and Malaysia and that, too, threatens the forests of the heart of Borneo.

We will continue to work on the issues as I have described, and in the way that my hon. Friend knows—through the EU and the FLEGT partnerships that are under way. Through that process, we shall take up the concerns that my hon. Friend has raised today.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended until half-past Two o'clock.

Housing

John Cummings (in the Chair): Quite a few Members want to make speeches this afternoon. If contributions can be kept to around 10 minutes, I am sure that everyone can be accommodated.

2.30 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr. Cummings. I welcome the Minister, whom I like and respect in equal measure, to his role. His elevation was overdue and well deserved, and I am delighted that he will be responding. I am grateful to the other Members present for coming, and for deciding to participate in a debate on a subject that is rising rapidly towards the top of the political agenda. That was shown at an early stage by the new Prime Minister's announcement that the Minister for Housing would attend Cabinet, which demonstrates that this is now one of the biggest political issues in the country.

There is no doubt that there is a big problem with housing provision in this country. The subject of this debate is fairly wide-ranging, and I intend to touch on a number of issues, to which I hope the Minister can respond. First, we should set out some of the problems that we face. A typical first-time buyer is now unable to afford a mortgage in 93 per cent. of towns in the UK. Given recent interest rate rises and future ones to come, it appears that that situation will only get worse. We should be very concerned about that.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that part of the reason for the unaffordability of homes for first-time buyers is the lack of housing supply over the longer term, and that one of the major bugbears is the failure of local communities to recognise the need for more house building?

Philip Davies: I will come to that in a few moments. There is no doubt that we need to build more houses of all types. We undoubtedly need more private housing and it seems increasingly clear that we need more social housing provision, too. However, my concern and the focus of my contribution today is not so much the supply side, which the Government appear to be concentrating solely on, but the demand side.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising an important and topical issue. Although he is focusing on the demand side, does he accept that since I came into Parliament, the total number of immigrants to this country each year has increased by 300,000, that that is causing a massive increase in demand, and that it is one of the factors that we should take into account? I am not denigrating the immigrants themselves—this is a matter of public policy that has not been considered by the Government.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is entirely right and he is certainly on to something. One issue that I want to focus on is the impact of immigration on housing provision.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): There is no doubt that internal migration within the country and external migration into the country are factors—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has read my Select Committee's excellent report, which sets out all the figures, so they are hardly a secret—but will the hon. Gentleman consider demography? The happy fact that we are living longer is responsible for about 40 per cent. of the extra demand.

Philip Davies: The hon. Lady is right, and I shall certainly not be suggesting that immigration is the only reason that we need more houses. A number of factors come into play, and my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) rightly pointed out that immigration is one. We should not ignore it. The problem is that the Government have made some 17 statements—either oral or written—on housing, and yet not one has mentioned the effect that immigration is having on housing provision in this country. It is such an important factor that it surely cannot be right that of those 17 different statements, not one has touched on the impact of immigration.

Houses are becoming unaffordable for first-time buyers. Last year, we had the lowest annual total of first-time buyers since 1980—just 315,000. To strike a contrast, back in 1997 there were 503,000 first-time buyers. That shows the scale of the problem that we face. Fewer people are getting on to the housing ladder, and last year saw one of the first falls in the number of owner-occupied houses in this country. The Government should be ashamed of that and anxious to do something about it.

On affordability, the National Housing Federation states that in my local authority area—I would have thought that Bradford was one of the most affordable places in the country, not one of the least—the average house price is about £123,000. The average annual income needed for a mortgage to cover that figure is more than £33,000; however, the average income in Bradford is just over £19,000. Couples might just about be able to afford to buy a house, but in many cases they might not. Single people who want to get on the housing ladder when they leave university or school or enter work for the first time have little chance of getting into the housing market, even in Bradford. I am sure that that problem must be even worse in other parts of the country. We have a big problem.

The Government have decided that the answer is to build 3 million new homes over the next 20 years. My concern is that the focus seems to be entirely on supply. We are just accepting what is happening—and so we need to build 3 million new homes. There must be some mileage in considering the demand side of the equation, as well as the supply side. We are a small island—we cannot get away from our geographical nature—and surely we cannot just keep building more new houses in to the future. Surely someone will say, "That's it. We're not prepared to give up any more green fields, green belt, gardens or land." I am not entirely sure when that point will come, or when the Government think that it will come. Surely it is not sustainable to build 3 million houses every 20 years. At some point, that will have to come to an end.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): Is it not deeply disingenuous of the hon. Gentleman, despite his earlier protestations, to make the case that the need for additional housing is

primarily or even largely driven by immigration? As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) said, the increased longevity of Britons is a key factor. In addition, a fundamental driver is household change. The real demand has come because families are no longer living together in the numbers that they used to. Those two factors are overwhelmingly driving the increase in demand. It is disgraceful of him to place that burden on immigration.

John Cummings (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Philip Davies: I understand the hon. Lady's reluctance to get into a debate about immigration and its impact on housing. That is part of the problem with which we have been dealing: nobody will address the issues. She is absolutely right. I said earlier that there are many factors at play, and that immigration is only one. Family breakdown is certainly another, and it is a subject that I shall also mention. I have not even come to the numbers yet, so the hon. Lady is not aware of the extent to which I am claiming that immigration plays a role.

Bob Spink: My hon. Friend may have seen in the *Hansard* for 17 July that the party colleague of the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), said:

> "In the last three years for which we have data, the number of people coming to this country is about 2 million and the number leaving is about 1 million."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 17 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 8-9WH.]

Those figures may help my hon. Friend to judge the level of housing demand that flows from immigration. He will know that if the House does not address this issue, we will leave a vacuum into which the fundamentalist parties will come, which will be bad for immigrants and for our democracy.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right and I shall come to the figures. In passing, I pay tribute to Sir Andrew Green of Migrationwatch UK, who has used Government figures—not his own—to highlight the problem that we face. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), who secured an informative and good debate yesterday on immigration and touched on the issue of housing, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who has done a great deal of work in this field. He has published a pamphlet called, "Too Much of a Good Thing? – Towards a balanced approach to immigration". I think that it is available in all good bookshops, and I urge Members to have a look at it and to read yesterday's debate, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex made some pertinent points.

According to the Government's own figures, 31 per cent. of the new houses built are needed to deal with immigration. That means that of the 3 million houses that the Government have said need to be built, by their own admission 1 million are needed to deal with future migration into this country. They are needed to deal not with the current level of immigration, but with the Government's projection of future migration, accepting their estimate that there will be a 30 per cent. drop in immigration, and factoring in their figures. That is how much immigration affects the amount of housing required. It is no good our trying to pretend that those figures are not there—they are the Government's own and we cannot sweep them under the carpet.

The number of asylum seekers granted permission to stay in the UK has exceeded the number of new social houses built by nearly 40,000 in the 10 years since 1997. The number of grants of asylum and extended leave to remain has totalled more than 228,000, compared with the 188,000 additional social and local authority homes built in the period. That is clearly unsustainable. The Government cannot allow it to continue, and then wonder why there is such a shortage of housing at local authority level and for first-time buyers.

Currently, one migrant a minute is coming into this country—the equivalent in population terms of a city the size of Birmingham every three years or so. That level of immigration is completely unsustainable, and unless the Government get to grips with the issue and we have a controlled and sustainable level of immigration, we will not solve the housing crisis that we face.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Would the hon. Gentleman care to say how many people are leaving the country because they are emigrating? Would he also care to say, since he is so keen on the subject, why successive Governments, particularly those of his own party, built so few social houses and encouraged the sale of existing social stock?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point made clear the net level of immigration. People are leaving the country, but far more people are coming in—that was my hon. Friend's point. The shortage of social housing is largely fuelled by the increase in the number of people coming into the country through immigration, as the hon. Gentleman will find if he speaks to his colleagues in parts of the east end of London, where this issue is significant.

Dr. Starkey: The hon. Gentleman has made a serious suggestion—I shall not use the word "allegation", as it is a bit pejorative. Would he like to set out exactly what his evidence is? May I suggest that he should not argue about one area of the country and then generalise from it, as he has just done? The figures clearly show that most migrants to this country go to London. Just as 800,000 people, largely young families, are leaving London every year for the wider south-east, 800,000 migrants from abroad are coming into London to fill the employment gaps left. The hon. Gentleman should not suggest that that is happening across the country and that migration is therefore causing the pressure on social housing. The pressure is everywhere, whether or not there are migrants there.

Philip Davies: The hon. Lady makes a fair point, but I was referring to my part of the world—that was the purpose of my seeking the debate. There has been a big increase in the amount of migration into Bradford over many years and particularly in recent years. The point that I was making to the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) is that there is a severe shortage of social housing in certain parts of London, caused by immigration.

Ms Buck: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I shall make some progress. I know that others wish to speak, and we could get bogged down for a very long time on this one issue.

I hope that the Government will indicate what effect they feel immigration has had on the amount of new housing required and what they intend to do about it. Do they accept that we need a limit on immigration to this country, and does the Minister accept the figure that I gave—that one third of new housing is needed to deal with immigration?

To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), according to Government figures a lot of the growth in housing need is due to the increase in one-person households. Part of the problem is demographic—nobody would dispute that—but it is also partly caused by family breakdown. A charity based in my constituency called Nightstop UK does a fantastic job in dealing with homeless people between the ages of 16 and 24. I highlight it because it does a superb job across the country in helping young homeless people to find homes.

When homeless people come to Nightstop UK, it does a survey and asks them what the factors relating to their homelessness are. Between 2001 and 2006, 44 per cent.—the single biggest figure—of young people who went to it said that family breakdown was the biggest reason for their homelessness; only 3 per cent. said that it was a lack of accommodation. Family breakdown in one form or another was driving their homelessness. I therefore encourage Members to examine carefully the recommendations made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) and his social justice policy review group. He made some brave and intelligent observations about what can be done to tackle family breakdown, which causes a great deal of misery to a lot of young people, not just in Shipley but across the country. We need to consider what we can do to tackle that problem.

Despite what I have said, I accept that we need more housing. If the Government were to tackle some of the issues driving the demand for housing, we would not need as much housing as they claim, but I accept that more houses need to be built. One issue to consider is where we are going to build them. I would not like them to be built on green belt land. The amount of housing built on such land has been one of my concerns in the past few years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk) promoted a private Member's Bill last year that would have introduced a rule whereby, once land had been allocated as green belt, it would be green belt for ever. If it is green belt land today, it should surely be green belt land tomorrow; that should not change. The Government will say, "There is as much green belt land now as there was in 1997." [Hon. Members: "More."] Indeed, but the issue is that it is not the same green belt land and it is not of the same quality. The Government build houses on some of the most beautiful parts of the country and replace those areas with land that most people would not consider green belt, and which is not of the same quality. To me, that is an erosion of the green belt, whether or not it is so in numbers terms.

Between 1997 and 2004, the Government allowed 162 planning applications for developments on green belt land, although they had the power to stop them. The aviation White Paper proposes aviation expansion resulting in the loss of 700 hectares of green belt land, and about 10,000 acres of green belt are at risk from proposals in draft Government regional plans, including land in Luton, Harlow, Bath, Bristol, Birmingham, Coventry, Cheltenham, Gloucester, Bournemouth, Poole and Nottingham. I urge the Minister to consider seriously the impact of allowing developments on green belt land, and then trying to cover that up by replacing it with land that is not of the same nature or quality, and pretending that there has been no erosion of the green belt under this Government. It is clear that there has been.

That is a particular problem in my region of Yorkshire and Humber, where 17 per cent. of the land within 1997 designated green belt areas has changed to residential use. That strikes me as an incredibly high figure—the national average in England is 12 per cent. Five per cent. of new dwellings built between 1992 and 2001 were built in 1997 designated green belt areas. I find that unacceptable, and I seriously hope that the Minister will reconsider the protection that we give to green belt land, and not just replace it with other land.

I also hope that the Government will reflect on building on floodplains. We have seen the devastating consequences, particularly in parts of Yorkshire, of building houses on floodplains. This is also a big issue in the Yorkshire and Humber region. The amount of land changing to residential use and the percentage of new dwellings being built in 2002 flood-risk areas is 16 per cent. It is no good allowing and encouraging houses to be built on floodplains and then saying how sorry we are when many of them get flooded, particularly if the response is as inadequate as it has been in many areas, but that is a topic for a different occasion. I hope that if one positive thing comes out of the tragedy experienced in many parts of the country, but particularly in parts of Yorkshire, in the past few weeks, it will be that the Government think again about the sense of building lots of houses on floodplains. All that that does is cause a great deal of misery to many people.

Dr. Starkey: I assume that the hon. Gentleman is aware of the new planning guidance that the Government introduced about a year ago—I am sure that the Minister will correct me if I have got the date wrong—which very much strengthens Environment Agency guidance to local authorities, and enables the agency to call in an application if the council goes ahead and refuses to listen to it. I imagine that the hon. Gentleman supports that Government measure, which will deal with the problem that he identifies.

Philip Davies: The hon. Lady must consider the measure as a whole. In a few minutes, I shall discuss some of the pressures that local authorities face in finding places to build houses. Those pressures are driven by the Government's policy on targets, and if she will bear with me, I will come to that issue shortly. I hope that the Minister will reflect on the problems of building houses on floodplains.

I would also like to see a reluctance to build houses on gardens. My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) has done a great deal to promote a

Bill to reclassify gardens from brownfield to greenfield sites. Of course, we all want more houses to be built on brownfield sites.

Mr. Love: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, because of the concerns that have been expressed throughout the country and, indeed, in this House, the Government have moved to change planning legislation in that regard. It is now possible for local planning authorities to reject such applications.

Philip Davies: Indeed, and anything that strengthens the hand of local authorities to prevent building on gardens is a good thing, but it still does not deal with the possibility of Government planning inspectors overruling the local authority in such matters.

Mr. Paul Truswell (Pudsey) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I will in a moment. I hope that there will be a presumption from now on that houses should not be built on gardens, because doing so blights local areas and completely changes the nature of villages. Places in my constituency such as Baildon, Eldwick and Menston have faced many such applications recently. I hope that there will be a presumption that houses should not be built on gardens and that gardens should be considered greenfield sites.

Mr. Truswell: I congratulate my honourable neighbour on securing this debate. I apologise for the fact that the attractions of a delegated legislation Committee mean that I will not be able to stay until the end of the debate. Does he share my concern that local authorities such as Leeds and perhaps Bradford are not making sufficient use of their current planning powers—such as the action plans in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and planning policy statement 3—to judge applications by the way that they meet housing need, rather than by the profit motive of developers? Also, is he satisfied that local authorities are doing enough to ensure that there is a sufficient proportion of affordable housing, and that that housing is truly affordable, when they do grant planning permission?

Philip Davies: I have a great deal of sympathy with the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, but we should recognise that local authorities often find themselves in a difficult position when it comes to housing applications. They are faced with piles of planning guidance from central Government, and with targets set for them by the regions—even though the regional assemblies have now been abolished—for the number of houses that have to be built in a certain area. Local authorities have to factor in all those things when deciding on planning applications.

It is no good trying to pretend that local authorities have a free reign in dealing with planning applications, because, as we all know, they do not. They often operate under the threat of a developer taking his case to a planning inspector on appeal, and the planning inspector then overruling the local authority's decision, at immense cost to the local authority and the council tax payer. We cannot ignore that factor in their deliberations. According to the Government's figures, a planning inspector overrules a council's decision in one third of cases, so that threat is always hanging over local authorities.

Mr. Truswell: Will the hon. Gentleman accept my point that councils need to maximise the use of their powers to resist appeals and to substantiate the case before planning inspectors, but that often, they do not?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but I would like the Government to give local authorities more freedom in determining planning applications. At the end of the day, they are democratically accountable and best placed to know what is in the best interests of the local area. It is unfortunate that a planning inspector from Bristol will often visit a given area and overrule a democratically accountable and elected local authority that has made a decision that may be popular in the local community.

I certainly welcomed the announcement about abolishing regional assemblies—something that the Conservative party has called for for many years. My concern is that we have not actually moved away at all from the idea that a regional body of unelected, unaccountable and unwanted people should make decisions about the number of houses to be built in a particular area. The Minister accepted yesterday that the spatial planning strategies will still be going ahead as planned, and that the number of houses that the regional body, at the behest of Government policy, will expect my local authority to build will therefore be unchanged. My local authority must find places for those houses, regardless of whether local people want them or whether there are suitable places for them. The local authority is under pressure to find places, so that housing targets can be met.

The Sustainable Communities Bill went through the House of Commons not too long ago with all-party support. Its purpose was to try to ensure that local communities have more say in what happens in their local area. If the Government truly support the Bill, I hope that they will give more power and freedom to local authorities to determine housing applications, without the spectre of planning inspectors and regional targets hanging over them.

I have one final point. I am aware that I have taken up a lot of time, Mr. Cummings, but I have tried to be generous with interventions. One of the things that really irritates my constituents, particularly in Baildon—the village in which I live—is that housing applications are approved and more and more buildings go up, yet there is no infrastructure to support them. In the surveys that I carry out, this is a big issue for local residents. All that happens is that traffic problems and the quality of life get worse. Local people would be much happier if they felt that the infrastructure support followed the amount of housing.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. We either have a housing shortage or we do not. If we do have a housing shortage, it has to be met and there has to be building somewhere. The point that he makes about the Sustainable Communities Bill is a fair one, but the issue is one for local authorities to decide—including, I suggest, his own. I was on the Committee that considered that Bill, and the thrust of it is that all the appropriate community infrastructure, such as schools, community centres, doctors and so on, must be in place when substantial development takes place. That is basic sense for any planning authority. I am surprised that his planning authorities have not learnt that. What have they been doing over the years?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman says that these are basic matters, but this is an issue all around the country. I do not know whether my local authority is unique in terms of the problems that it has experienced. I suspect not, because the issue of housing developments going up and the infrastructure not being there to support them has been raised in virtually every local authority in the country. There are certainly places in my constituency where houses are built and where every available piece of land is sold off to developers and built on. Yet no extra roads or infrastructure is put in place to support those houses, which exacerbates people's frustration about the number of new houses that are built. The hon. Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell) will know that well, because there is a new planning application on his side of the constituency boundary near Menston, which borders my part of the constituency. A heap of houses are going up on an already congested road, but there will be no more roads built to support them, which just creates more problems for local residents. That is a big problem all around the country.

Mr. Truswell: I assume that the development that the hon. Gentleman is talking about is High Royds. We have known about it for 10 years or more, so the local authority had a huge amount of time to plan, but it never did. That is the point that Labour Members are trying to make: planning powers are not being used as effectively as they could be to create a framework that anticipates pressure on the infrastructure.

Philip Davies: I do not wish to get bogged down on a parochial matter, but the hon. Gentleman will also know that an extra 500 houses will be built on my side of the constituency boundary in Menston, on land on which the council did not want to build. The planning inspector put in the unitary development plan against the wishes of local people and the local council. Part of the issue is that the needs and wishes of local councils are overridden by Government bodies.

I apologise for having taken up so much time. I have had a quick canter around a few housing issues that affect my constituents, and which are of concern to many people in the country. I genuinely hope that the Minister will do his best to address some of the points that have been raised.

3.2 pm

Mr. Andrew Smith (Oxford, East) (Lab): Housing is vital to my constituents, as it is to the whole country. I am pleased that it is now at the top of the political agenda, for which I have argued for some time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing the debate, although I disagree with some of his more provocative remarks on immigration and the green belt, which I will come back to later. I, too, would like to take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment and to welcome the innovation that the Minister for Housing now attends Cabinet.

I am particularly pleased about the strong emphasis on building new housing, particularly new social housing, in the draft legislative programme. Given the legacy of neglect that we inherited, the Government have a good record on investing in the refurbishment of social housing. Progress towards the decent homes standard is important, but not nearly enough has been done to increase supply, both of social housing and affordable housing to buy. That means that in my constituency and many others, thousands of people endure the misery of inadequate and over-crowded housing conditions, which has an appalling effect on their quality of life and on their life chances.

As the drive for more housing gathers pace and with the Green Paper in mind, I am particularly concerned that nothing in that Green Paper or in the language used to describe our housing approach closes off the option of development on appropriate green belt land near Oxford. In the circumstances confronting our area, we must have an urban extension to Oxford if we are to meet housing need, and there is nowhere else for that to go but on present green belt land because green belt boundaries are drawn so close to the built-up area of the city.

Housing provision is a key local concern to those in housing need and to the many people who have grown up in the city and who cannot now afford to live there. The impact of housing provision on the labour market, public services and business activity is raised with me all the time, whether I am meeting the chamber of commerce, the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, universities, hospitals, or the trade unions. Just about everybody with an interest in housing provision and the economic vitality of Oxford, which is at the cutting edge of regional and national growth and could contribute still more given room to grow, accepts that we have to modify the green belt. I and local councillors have campaigned hard on this issue. Readiness to go ahead with an urban extension is synonymous locally with being serious about tackling the housing crisis.

There is an overwhelmingly strong case for building more housing in the south-east, particularly in central Oxfordshire. The city's housing needs survey, which was conducted by Fordhams, identified a need for 1,700 to 1,800 new affordable properties a year. I would like to press the case for agreeing with the "Barker Review of Land Use Planning", which states that the green belt policy

"has...in some parts of Southern England...had some unsatisfactory consequences".

Barker's interim report notes that there are now some 27,000 more jobs than residents in Oxford, which has led to large numbers of commuters "jumping"—to use the phrase that she used—the green belt every day. Of course, in practice, people are not so much jumping the green belt as crawling through it in the polluting traffic jams that creep in and out of the city each day.

Recommendation 9 of the Barker review states:

"Regional planning bodies and local planning authorities should review green belt boundaries as part of their regional spatial strategy/local development framework processes to ensure that they remain relevant and appropriate, given the need to ensure that any planned development takes place in the most sustainable location".

3.7 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.22 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Smith: To meet the enormous backlog of social housing need in Oxford there is a strong case for one or more urban extensions of the city into the green belt, with a compensating extension of the green belt elsewhere. The city has unique economic needs, which can best be met within or adjacent to it. The substantial scale of housing needs within the central Oxfordshire sub-region cannot be accommodated in the county's towns alone. There is an opportunity to build truly sustainable communities, associated with the city; also, new infrastructure is more sustainable and the associated costs are lower in proximity to the city.

Oxford city already has a very good brownfield development record. It is consistently the local authority with the highest rate in the country of reuse of existing sites for development. Yet that development has manifestly failed to meet the city's substantial need for new homes. Moreover, the scope for additional housing in the built-up area is rapidly becoming exhausted, with unacceptable pressures on existing residential areas and green spaces in the city, including gardens, which the hon. Gentleman talked about. I very much hope that with the Green Paper and the south-east plan examination under way, the chance will now be taken to review the central Oxfordshire green belt, in the light of the overwhelming evidence, as well as the recommendations of the Barker review.

Before I draw my remarks to a close, let me knock on the head the nonsense that is heard from opponents of house building that those of us who believe in tackling market failure and responding to people's real housing needs somehow want to concrete over south-east England. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the Barker review analysis showed, outside London just 12.2 per cent. of land is currently developed. We can both build the extra houses that are needed and preserve the distinctive beauty of the English countryside. We can also respect the greatest aesthetic and ecological characteristic of cities such as Oxford by protecting the green wedges—the corridors of countryside that come right into the city centre, which, if we do not review the green belt, will come under inexorable pressure.

Some hon. Members may have seen a comment piece by Tristram Hunt in *The Observer* last Sunday, which claimed that Ministers

"advocated ripping up Britain's green belt to solve the housing crisis."

Ministers have said no such thing. They have argued that the primary source of land for new housing should be brownfield sites, but that local circumstances must be examined through the planning process. My argument is that within the overall provision of green belt protection we urgently need a review of the green belt in central Oxfordshire, to provide for housing and the continued economic vitality of the city. Those such as Tristram Hunt and the Campaign to Protect Rural England who maintain blanket opposition to any building in the green belt fail to understand that although it has an important role in preventing urban sprawl it is also responsible, in places such as Oxford, for urban strangulation. Such cities face enormous pressures, because of an over-tight green belt, including the loss of valued green spaces inside the city, the proliferation of houses in multiple occupation and flats, which are destroying the character of residential areas, the environmental degradation and congestion caused by thousands of commuters crossing the green belt every day, and a catastrophic housing shortage, with a real risk that Oxford and places like it will become affordable only to a small elite.

Mr. Hunt suggested in his article that developing part of the green belt might

"butter up the Home Builders Federation".

My message to him is that it would alleviate the suffering and distress of families who live in overcrowded conditions, whose children cannot live in the city they grew up in, and would do something to help those in temporary or inadequate privately rented accommodation. I urge my hon. Friends in Government to be resolute and energetic in the drive for the new homes that we need, and, where the social, environmental and economic arguments point to the need for modest changes in the green belt, to get on and make them, using, of course, all the proper procedures, so that those whom we represent, who need and deserve decent housing, can get it.

3:27 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing the debate, and welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his position. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) I also welcome the higher profile that housing has now secured, even if I do not necessarily welcome all the ways in which the issue is presented, including some that we heard from the hon. Gentleman. We look forward very much to next week's housing Green Paper as a further demonstration of the Government's renewed commitment to tackling what we all agree is both a crisis of affordable housing to buy and, particularly, a shortage of rented accommodation for people in housing need.

It is important to understand the full range of reasons that have driven that level of housing need in recent years. We accept that there is now a backlog affecting housing provision, because of a decades-long failure of the house building industry to meet need. It was only two years ago that private sector house building fell to its lowest rate since 1926. The pent-up demand that is now in the system is in large part driven by that failure. Of course, in the social rented sector it is also driven by a near halving of supply in many areas of the country, because of the impact of the right to buy. We all support the right to buy. It represented, in many ways, the biggest shift of wealth to poorer people that has ever happened in this country. However, for decades we failed to replace the stock, and as a consequence the people occupying many of the properties that were sold under the right to buy are no longer of the same profile as those who seek social rented housing. They are the ones who have borne the brunt of the impact.

I think that all Labour Members recognise also—I am sure that we shall hear more about this, Mr. Cummings, if my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), who chairs the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, catches your eye—that there has been a rise in demand, which is driven by several factors. Those include, certainly, household change and the growth of single person households, the

[Ms Karen Buck]

impact of the buy-to-let market and second home ownership, which have also had a significant impact on housing provision, and, indeed, to a certain extent, migration.

I, certainly, have no difficulty with discussing the impact of migration on housing, but, of course, this is not a debate on migration, and it is important that we try to focus only on the implications for housing. However, let us be very clear about who these people are, and why, in certain cases, we have a housing obligation to them. Primary immigration to this country has not occurred for decades. People arriving in this country are doing so through a number of routes, and some of them are entitled to housing, particularly social housing, but many, of course, are not.

In my constituency, I have seen the impact of immigration through the refugee and asylum routes. I invite the hon. Gentleman, and anyone else who doubts the legitimacy of the housing claims of people in that situation, to come and meet some of those individuals, and to tell me that they do not have a reasonable claim to social housing: Under this blanket description of migration and its impact on housing, we are in grave danger of forgetting human beings: who they are, what their circumstances are and the fact that, in many cases, they have come from the worst places and circumstances in the world. We have an absolute obligation to ensure that their needs are met.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend has just made an excellent point, but would she agree that those who have fled persecution and made their homes in this country are making a fantastic economic and social contribution to our society? Without the levels of migration that we have had, London would simply stop.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One need only look at London's public services, and hospitality and retail industries to see that that is the case. The statistics, of course, bear that out.

Setting aside asylum seekers who, of course, do not qualify for social housing, as well as those who have had a claim for asylum accepted, and become refugees and British citizens, many migrants simply do not have a claim to social housing. That is often forgotten given this blanket acceptance that migrants can arrive off the boat or through the channel tunnel and immediately be given priority on the housing waiting list; and I am afraid that quite often that mythology is consciously stirred up, which causes enormous damage to community cohesion.

The truth is that competition for social rented housing has come about because the number of people—there has been a relatively modest increase—seeking social housing are being squashed into an ever reducing number of social rented tenancies. If, through the additional investment that we are looking forward to in the comprehensive spending review and proposals in the housing Green Paper, we can redress some of that shortfall, not only will we meet the desperate housing needs of the homeless and those living in seriously over-crowded housing, but we will do something very important for community cohesion.

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady not think that after 10 years of a Labour Government, something should have been done already? In those 10 years, the situation has got much worse, rather than better. Is that not a sad indictment of this Labour Government?

Ms Buck: The number of times that I have said in this place that I am personally disappointed that the building of social housing has not been a higher priority for the Government would probably run into three figures. I think that it should have been a priority, but unfortunately that has not been the case, although in fairness to the Government they have been dealing with a decades-long backlog of housing in poor condition, because it was neglected by the previous Administration, and billions have been spent on the decent homes initiative, which has improved the quality of life for tens of thousands in my constituency. Not everything can be a priority at the same time, but I would have liked to have seen more house building.

We are now seeing, however, an extension of house building in London. I welcome very much the fact that the Mayor of London has given housing such a high priority; his housing strategy is driving forward additional housing construction. However, I ask my hon. Friend, the Minister, to keep his eye on the ball, because some local councils, particularly Conservative ones, are saying, on the one hand, "We want more house building," but, on the other hand, when it comes to house building in their local areas, they are saying, "No, we are putting up the signs. We are full here and we do not want any more homes." Sadly, that has been exacerbated since a number of councils became Conservative-controlled last year following the London elections. We have seen an immediate reduction in the number of properties coming on stream and being made available.

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made exactly my point, and I hope that the Minister will address it in his closing remarks. If the onus again is to be put on councils to build houses—we welcome that commitment—what do the Government intend to do about Conservative councils such as Wandsworth borough council, which is building about 12 per cent. affordable housing, and Hammersmith and Fulham council, which is halving the targets for affordable housing in its borough? Fuelled by the sort of inflammatory remarks that we hear from Opposition Members, there is a willingness to decrease the amount of social housing, rather than to increase it.

Ms Buck: I believe that the last period for which we have figures showed that my council in Westminster achieved only 21 per cent. of housing building at the affordable end of the spectrum, against a target of 50 per cent. We need not just more house building, but more that is not at the luxury end of the market. Luxury house building was one of the reasons that even properties being built were not providing homes for first-time buyers and those who do not have hundreds of thousands of pounds to spend on their own homes.

Supply is the key to resolving many of these problems, and we need a grown-up contribution from politicians of all parties and councils. We cannot build houses in the abstract; they have to be built in communities. Local

councils and politicians need to show some leadership, step up to the plate, demand sustainability and ensure that facilities are in place to support those communities. They must also take on the leadership role to ensure more homes.

I have one or two other quick points: although supply is the key, the Government need to do a lot more on the demand side of the equation. I am not with the hon. Member for Shipley and some of his proposals, but we must ensure that we have a home swap system that actually works. Many people want to exchange their own homes, but we have not had in place for a long time, I am afraid, an effective mechanism that allows people choice and flexibility in moving between homes.

We need also proper investment in measures that allow those under-occupying to trade properties for ones that they want. Hundreds of thousands of people are living in homes too large, strictly speaking, for their household size. Those are their homes and nobody should force them to move, but many of them would move if an option were available that met their needs and they were given an incentive. A financial incentive of a meaningful size would be a considerably cheaper strategy than house building. I am afraid that it beggars belief that we have not managed to crack that particular nut.

I, and many of my colleagues, were very relieved when the recent John Hills inquiry into social housing rejected the siren calls for an end to the security of tenancies for people in social housing. However, it was alarming once again to see a report launched this morning by the Smith Institute, which flags up the possibility of ending the security of tenure. That report opened with the words:

"Shelter and security are the most basic of human needs".

And so say all of us. It made other good points:

"The government should stop talking up home ownership as the only solution"—

to housing pressures—

"and support the rapid expansion of the rented sector and social housing in particular."

So there is much to commend.

However, the report went on to say, alarmingly, that a

"simple reapplication for tenancy every five years"

would ensure that those who remained eligible for social rented accommodation would remain in that accommodation. Presumably, if they were not eligible, they would be out on their ear. That must be resisted. It would be a disaster of epic proportions for those people who are often the most vulnerable in society, many of whom have been down the homelessness route, if they thought that they had a home for life and the rug was pulled out from under them. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to say that that proposal is unacceptable and would damage only those people who need most assistance.

The current measure has been a long time coming, but we need more measures than simply the expansion of social housing and house building generally—which the Government have announced—including measures to tackle demand. Let us get on with that task and ensure that local councils are part of the solution and not part of the problem. Above all, let us not scapegoat individuals, be they homeless families, people in housing need or immigrants, as the sole cause of what is actually a very complex problem.

John Cummings (in the Chair): Contributions of no more than five minutes in length will allow another three hon. Members to speak before the winding-up speeches.

3.41 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I will abide by your suggestion, Mr. Cummings. I welcome the debate and the fact that a Green Paper comes out next week. I hope that that Green Paper will at last enable the corner to be turned on the housing crisis in this country. I also hope that it will at last level the playing field for tenants of council estates or any other council tenant, so that the fourth option will be accepted and it will be legitimate for tenants to vote for an arm's length management organisation, for a private finance initiative, for a stock transfer or to remain as council tenants and receive exactly the same investment and treatment that is so necessary for them.

I pay tribute to the Government for the amount of money that has been put into improving existing stock. My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) is correct to say that that has been a major priority and it has meant a real change in the lives of many people who now have new kitchens, new roofs, new windows and new heating systems. There has been fundamentally a great improvement. That issue was sadly neglected by the Conservative Government in all those 18 years. There has been a major improvement and a major step forward.

The area that I represent, like that of my hon. Friend, is inner-city London, where the housing crisis is most acute. I hope that the Green Paper will recognise that unless a substantial number of council properties are built in the areas of highest housing stress, we will all pay a price. More than 900,000 children in this country live in grossly overcrowded accommodation. The effect on their lives is dramatic. They underachieve at school, they over-attend at doctors' surgeries and hospitals, and they overachieve in crime and social disorder. Teenage children growing up in overcrowded flats on estates or anywhere else simply cannot socialise at home. Therefore they go out, and all the other problems emanate from that.

If we want to improve social cohesion in our society, the best way to do that is through huge investment in the housing needs of the very poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. The current crisis means that local authorities cannot house people in normal council housing or with registered social landlords or housing associations, because there is nowhere for them to go. Instead, they are put in private rented accommodation, most of which is paid for through housing benefit.

I shall give an example. This morning, I visited a family living in a one-bedroomed flat—two teenage children, one small child and the parents were all sharing one tiny bedroom. The flat was damp, mice-infested and leaked, and the extraction equipment of the restaurant down below pumped straight into the bedroom windows. That is a private rented flat. The rent is £780 a month, all of which is paid through housing benefit. In other

[Jeremy Corbyn]

words, the public sector is paying £780 a month for a family to live in absolute misery. The only beneficiaries from that are the private sector landlords. It is simply an insane form of investment. How much better would it be to put money into bricks and mortar and build new places, rather than subsidising slum landlords, who exist all over London at present? I hope that when the housing Green Paper comes out, we will understand the absolute priority that should be attached to doing that.

I hope that the Green Paper, in recognising housing needs, will also recognise that many people living in the private rented sector, who do not necessarily depend on benefits to stay there but who are paying a very high rent, look to have some form of control and security—some form of secure future. In my constituency, there has been a very big increase in buy to rent. That means that many people are living unstable and insecure lives. Some form of security is needed for people living in that situation.

As I have only five minutes in which to speak, my last point will be on registered social landlords and housing associations. I recognise that RSLs have built quite a lot of places, although unfortunately nowhere near enough, as councils have not built anything over the past few years. There are questions about the management of housing associations, the efficiency of that management and the accountability of those who manage housing associations. I hope that the Green Paper will look towards a degree of accountability in that respect, because many of my constituents have real problems with housing associations, and housing associations themselves have financial problems that too often they solve by selling off vacant flats that are desperately needed for the social sector.

I hope that the Government will recognise that yes, we have had great achievements in improving existing council stock, but we must provide new homes for social rent. I say that because 75 or 80 per cent. of people in my constituency have no chance whatever of buying anywhere. The only route out of misery and poverty for them is through the provision of good-quality social housing through the local authorities. I hope that the Green Paper will recognise that and that we will turn the corner and end the misery being experienced by so many people living in inner-city Britain at the present time.

3.46 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I shall use my constituency as an example of the way in which economic growth, a thriving economy, migration and housing are interlinked—not in the negative way that the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) described, but in an extremely positive way.

Milton Keynes, as everyone knows, is a new city; it is 40 years old this year, but is still relatively new. It has been an immensely successful place, largely, I have to say, because of where it is, which is absolutely the right place to attract industry without any public subsidy at all. As a result, over the past decade 35,500 jobs have been created in Milton Keynes, and obviously that has required the creation of housing for the individuals working in Milton Keynes, but even so we have net inward migration daily, according to the 2001 census, of 16,000 people. I am sure that the figure is much bigger now, but I do not actually have a hard figure. We still have considerably more jobs than houses. Nevertheless, over the past year Milton Keynes topped the league in the south-east for the number of houses that were built. Last year, it was 1,857 houses—nearly twice the number for the second-placed town, which is Basingstoke—and 777 of those were for housing associations. The majority would have been for shared ownership, but a significant number would have been social rented housing.

We are creating jobs and building new houses. On the whole, Milton Keynes is a huge success. It is a place that people like living in. It has many lovely green spaces. I never tire of reminding the House that it is built on greenfield land—what was low-grade agricultural land—and that the biodiversity level in Milton Keynes, as evidenced by surveys of animals, insects and plants, is hugely greater now than it was when it was the monoculture that pervades across most of the rest of that bit of Buckinghamshire.

Milton Keynes is green, it is a nice place to live, and people choose to go there because they like it. It is also a city that is built on migration. There are, obviously, people living there who were born there, but the vast majority of people in Milton Keynes, including me, have come from somewhere else. They have come either from somewhere else in the UK—many are from London—or from outside it. That has added to the vitality and innovative nature of Milton Keynes and is a huge asset to the whole community of Milton Keynes. It is not a deficit; it is an asset. We as a country should regard migration in that way—as an asset.

Apart from the fact that we get new skills and new people, we are also redressing the rather bizarre demographic balance of our population, which, because we are living longer, is very overburdened—if I may use that phrase, as an elderly person myself nearly—with people who are moving into retirement and therefore need people of working age to pay taxes to keep them in the manner to which we have all become accustomed. That is partly what the migrant population is doing. It is redressing our demographic imbalance and ensuring that we have a thriving economy so that those of us who are moving into retirement or are retired have some hope of having a decent retirement because there will be a decent working population paying taxes.

Notwithstanding the success that is Milton Keynes, there is still a huge demand for market housing, shared housing and particularly for social rented housing. The effect of that on families can be extremely detrimental. I was mildly amused by the hon. Gentleman's comment that we should do something about family breakdown as that would reduce the need for housing. If we do not build more housing, there will be more family breakdown, because nothing is more conducive to family breakdown than families living in the sorts of situations that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) described, of which we are all aware from our constituencies—certainly we Labour Members are, anyway. There are families living in wholly unsuitable accommodation, usually in the private sector although there is sometimes overcrowding in the social sector, and paying enormous housing costs on top of that, so they are living in poor conditions and are under severe financial stress.

I seem to have overrun, but I want to throw another point into the pot about infrastructure. The next stage of development in Milton Keynes is a wonderful example of how the private and public sectors can work together to come up with a solution to deal with the infrastructure problem—the Milton Keynes infrastructure tariff, which is sometimes called a roof tax. We have been able to do that because we have a forward plan for the next 10 years and we know what infrastructure will be required with schools and so on. There is a list, which we can cost and then divvy up between the number of houses that are going to be built, which comes out at £18,500 per house. All the developers are happy to pay their share through section 106 because they know what it is being spent on and that the developers at the front-end will pay the same as those at the end. They know that, between them all, they will get the infrastructure that is required, thanks to the Treasury front-loading it as well, so that our schools are built before the houses are built. That model benefits everyone, and could be followed. Other local authorities should consider proper ways of using section 106.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con) *rose—*

Dr. Starkey: I shall not give way to the hon. Lady, who has only just come in, as we are very tight on time.

Other councils should consider proper uses of section 106, particularly the Tory councils that argue that there should not be planning gain supplement. They must come up with more effective ways of using the gain that landowners and private developers get out of planning permission to pay for the infrastructure that facilitates their profits.

3.52 pm

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing this debate, but I suggest that there might have been a slight mismatch between the title of the debate and his contribution. I welcome the Minister to his new role and congratulate the Government on placing housing at the top of their agenda, as the hon. Gentleman said at the start of the debate.

The issue at the forefront is making housing affordable for the many and not just the few. Members on both sides of the House look forward to next week's statement and Green Paper. Of course, there are demand issues, which we have talked about a little, but I think that the focus will primarily be on long-term supply, because such issues have developed over a long period. We can all remember back to the '50s and '60s, when it was not unusual for 300,000 houses to be built in a year. The Government are saying, and I agree wholeheartedly, that we need a significant and sustained increase in supply. The figure of 3 million houses has been mentioned, which I welcome as a recognition of the need that exists. We are also talking about a planning Bill to speed up the development process, and about partnerships between Departments in order to assemble the land that will make all that possible. We are doing all that in the context of trying to protect the environment and to build mainly on brownfield land.

I had a great deal of sympathy with the call of my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) for greater flexibility. We all know the problems: we face an acute housing shortage, and it is simple to see why. We are producing roughly 160,000 to 180,000 new homes a year, but household formation, of whatever sort, is running at 220,000 a year, so there is an enormous need out there. It is not just about first-time buyers, although they do face significant problems. In London, the average deposit for a first-time buyer is about £40,000. How many people can afford that? They are having to take on mortgages of five to six times their income. Such levels have not been seen since the 1980s, and it is tough out there for many first-time buyers.

Many people cannot afford to own their own house, and there are 500,000 overcrowded homes in the country. We all know the impact that that has on health, education and children's future prospects. Some 90,000 people are homeless or in temporary accommodation, and I welcome the Government's commitment to halving that number in the next few years. Given the enormous need out there, when people say, "Yes, we need to build more homes, but let's not have too many or have them in my area," I wonder how they would answer the question of how first-time buyers are to get on to the property ladder. What do they say about people who are homeless?

The case has been made that we need to increase supply; indeed, it was made by Kate Barker in her report, which said specifically that the level of market housing is relatively stable. The problem has primarily and most acutely been with the level of building of social, rented accommodation, which is at a quarter of that in the '50s, '60s and '70s. We all know why that happened, and we need to respond. The Government have responded in some ways. They have recognised and increased the provision of social, rented accommodation in the past few years, particularly this year, but we need to do more if we are to solve our housing problem.

Cambridge university has carried out several studies on housing, and it suggests that we need 10,000 to 20,000 additional new homes per year. I do not suggest that those figures should be a target, but I understand that the Select Committee has endorsed them as a place to start, at least. We must recognise that there is a great deal more to do, and that there are ways of dealing with these matters. We should use more modern construction methods to build homes more quickly. I hope that the mythical £60,000 house that the previous Deputy Prime Minister used to talk about can still become a reality.

We also need to think about having more family-sized accommodation rather than the one and two-bedroom units that seem to be churned out. Infrastructure has been mentioned. We must all recognise that the sustainability of the communities that we are creating has to be a major priority—my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East touched on that important issue. If we are to balance all the different aspects, we need to take regional factors into account. The Select Committee discussed that issue, and others have commented on it. The housing provision issues in London differ from those in the wider south-east or in Oxford. We need to take on board local opinion, knowledge and experience. The regional housing boards have an important role to play if we are to get the balance right regarding the type of accommodation that we are delivering.

John Cummings (in the Chair): Order. I have to move us on to the winding-up speeches.

3.59 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Cummings. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing an important debate. Given the respect that I have for things that I have heard him say previously, regrettably, I cannot congratulate him on his analysis of the solutions to the housing problems facing this country. Family breakdown is an issue, but his party's proposals for a tax break for married couples, irrespective of whether or not they have children, will hardly solve the problem, just as it did not in the 1970s. I was sad to hear him raise an immigration scare as being the answer to the housing problem.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) talked about the Select Committee report and gave the example of 80,000 people from London moving out to the south and the same number of immigrants moving in. The 80,000 people moving into London would not constitute 80,000 households, because many of them are young, single, eastern Europeans coming to work temporarily, for two or three years, before going home with their savings, and they are living in rented flats in multiple occupation. I can think of a small number of Polish workers who are doing the same thing even in Chesterfield, which has a small immigrant population.

In my constituency, immigration accounts for 3 per cent. or less of the population, and many of those people are second or third-generation English people. A huge housing problem exists even there. The waiting list for social housing in Chesterfield has trebled in the past 10 years, and that has nothing to do with immigration.

There is a housing crisis, so, like the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), I am pleased that this debate is taking place. Like him, I have been raising the issue since I entered Parliament—that was six years ago. The hon. Member for Shipley rightly said that there was a need for more private house building. The home ownership figure in this country is 71 per cent.—the highest in Europe—and it is difficult to see how much higher that can be pushed. The private housing market is overheated and under-supplied; first-time buyers and key workers cannot buy. Last week, in response to a statement by the Prime Minister, one hon. Member gave the example of an affordable flat in London that went on the market at £300,000. That makes a nonsense of much of the talk about providing affordable housing for people to buy.

Unless we do something about the housing market, we are in danger of entering another negative equity slump such as the one that we experienced in the 1980s and early 1990s. Mortgage debt has increased by 150 per cent.; lending is at three to three-and-a-half times people's income; interest rates have increased and are still climbing; the number of people in debt has doubled, and the number of repossessions has trebled this year compared with last year; and the fixed rates for the mortgages of 2 million people will end in the next 18 months. Therefore, the problem will get much worse in the near future.

Where will the new build come from to help us start to tackle the issue of the supply of houses for people to buy? The situation is not as bad as some people paint it: builders have a land bank for about 200,000 houses, which is a year's supply; identified brownfield sites will provide about 1 million houses; and there is scope for 1 million new housing premises over shops and commercial premises in cities and towns across the country. If we were to let councils have more flexibility and control, instead of having to respond to diktat from regional government offices and from London, they, too, would be able to bring more land on stream.

My constituency contains brownfield sites that are waiting to be developed. It is doing a good job on brownfield sites. It also contains greenfield sites—not green belt sites—that were identified for housing nearly 30 years ago, but they are rightly not being brought into housing use until all the brownfield areas have been redeveloped.

The greatest gap in the speech made by the hon. Member for Shipley was on the need for social housing—I believe that he allocated just six words to that. The waiting list for social housing has increased from 1 million to 1.6 million in the 10 years of this Government, which is a disgrace. Some 1 million children live in overcrowded accommodation, and 130,000 children live in unsuitable, temporary accommodation. Councils have been forced to privatise their housing stock, and are starved of funds if they do not. Only 4,000 council houses were built in the past 10 years, compared with 400,000 in the first 10 years of even Mrs. Thatcher's Government. We are told that housing associations are the answer, but they have not even built enough houses every year in the past 10 years to replace the right-to-buy losses.

John Cummings (in the Chair): Order. We must move on. I call Jacqui Smith.

4.4 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Cummings, but I am not the Home Secretary.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing this debate. The mere fact that there have been so many diverse contributions shows how interesting the House finds the subject of housing. I also congratulate the Minister on his first ministerial appearance in this Chamber. Perhaps he could take the message back to the House authorities that a full-day debate in Government time on housing would be worth the investment.

We are beginning to drill down into what the issues are. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) pointed out that longevity is one of the issues involved in the demand for housing. I am approaching my 60th birthday. I maintain that 60 is the new 40, but I am a victim of longevity. Several hon. Members referred to single-household formation and family breakdown, and those are also relevant issues.

I commend to all hon. Members the extensive report by the Commission on Social Justice, because its analysis is spot on and its recommendations will help us to move towards healing many places in our society.

I do not think that anyone disagreed with the view that migration was part of the reason for increased demand. There are many forms of migration, including internal migration, which the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West mentioned. We are also well aware of positive inward migration into this country from

other countries. It is accepted by the Government and is good for the economy. I do not have a problem with it, provided that it is controlled, that there are proper border police, and that we have clear knowledge about whom we are welcomir g into this country.

The previous Home Secretary said that the Home Office was "not fit for purpose". Part of the reason for that was that the immigration and nationality directorate was unable to deal with the flow of migrants and the people that we have here. That has been confirmed by a written answer that I received recently from the Home Office, saying that it would be five years before many cases will be sorted out. If people wait five years for a decision, not only will we have a dislocated society; we will also be unable to take the greatest advantage of those who are legitimately here, so that they can get into the economy.

Like everyone else, I look forward to next week's Green Paper. I hope that it is in better shape than that reported by Peter Riddell in *The Times*, that there is meat and substance to it, and that it addresses the issue of the green belt. Last week, the Secretary of State indicated that she was thinking of not defending the green belt, but by that very afternoon No. 10 had issued a denial. I hope that the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) has noted that denial and that the green belt will remain inviolate.

Yesterday, a statement was made on ending the regional assemblies and giving control over housing to even more undemocratic organisations—the regional development agencies. I must declare an interest: my husband is not only leader of East Sussex county council but deputy chairman of the South East England Development Agency. There are issues on which he and I do not necessarily have to agree. This is already on the record, but I believe that SEEDA or any other development agency making any decisions about housing in the south-east takes away from local people control over their own environment. The best way to get people to acknowledge that they want housing is for them to own that decision, rather than for it to be dictated by central control, as is already the leitmotif of this new Government. After three weeks, we have gone back to the old socialism.

4.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for my first Westminster Hall debate as a Minister, Mr. Cummings. You are my next-door neighbour in terms of parliamentary constituencies.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing an important debate. I like and respect him too. We worked well together on the Modernisation Committee. This has been a fascinating and important debate, reflecting the importance of the subject. Its energy, vibrancy and passion have made it extremely interesting, although at times I thought that I was in a debate on immigration and that I had been transported back in time to the 1950s. It is important that we have had this debate to ensure that this issue is at the top of the political agenda.

I do not have much time left in which to speak. I want to respond to all the points made by hon. Members. If I do not manage to do so, with their permission, I shall write to them. As a starting point, it is worth setting out where we started. Over the past 10 years, a great deal of improvement has been made in housing. Home owners have seen the value of their properties increase, thanks in some degree to sustained economic growth, stability and an implicit recognition on the part of home owners that interest rates will remain historically low and stable for the foreseeable future. The number of households living in non-decent housing in the social sector has fallen by more than 1 million. Concerted action means that homelessness is down by nearly 30 per cent., and the number of people sleeping rough has fallen from 1,850 on a single night in 1998 to just over 500 last year. Local authorities are also on course to halve the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 2010.

A climate of economic growth and stability, unlike the boom and bust of previous decades, has led to 1 million more home owners over the past 10 years. I welcome that, because it is absolutely right—indeed, vital—that the Government facilitate such ambitions and aspiration for hard-working families.

Most hon. Members who participated in the debate referred to demographics and how that squeezes demand. We have an ageing population, and more of us are living alone as a result of social changes, which produces a demand for new and rented homes. That imbalance is growing as demand rises faster than supply. As house prices have increased faster than wages, it has become increasingly difficult for young people to get on the housing ladder. It is important that we act now to ensure that present and future generations can access the housing market and reap the benefits of home ownership.

Projections show that on average, from now until 2026, 223,000 additional households are needed each year. In 2006, 185,000 extra homes were delivered, giving a shortfall of almost 40,000 homes. Unless we act now to address the problem, the serious problems of affordability will continue to worsen, further pricing people out of the market. Let us be blunt. We cannot bury our heads in the sand, ignore the problem and hope that some other community will deal with the matter that Opposition Members have alluded to.

A fundamental question—I do not think the Conservative party has addressed it—is how to ensure that our children, first-time buyers and young families will be able to afford homes in their own communities without relying on help from their families. Some families cannot tap into wealth. We must do something about that, and the Government are addressing the matter in a way that other parties are not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) and others rightly mentioned the imbalance in supply. In her review of housing supply, which was published in 2004, Kate Barker recognised that there had been an under-supply of new housing for many years, and called for a step change to address that. The Government's response in 2005 set out an ambition to increase the rate of new housing supply in England to 200,000 a year over the next decade, alongside a package of measures to reform the planning system, provide more social housing and protect the environment.

I return to what I would like to see in housing, which is the biggest domestic issue facing this country, and facing aspiration and our ability to fulfil our potential

[Mr. Iain Wright]

as a country. There seems to be an issue, because Conservative Members say that they fully understand the need for housing and agree full scale that there is a need for extra housing, but not in their communities. That is reminiscent of the phrase,

"Lord, make me pure, but not yet."

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) said, we need a grown-up discussion about how local authorities can engage properly in a regional and local debate about the availability of affordable and social housing in all our communities. The suggestion of putting up signs saying, "This community is full up"—that is what the hon. Member for Shipley seemed to allude to—is unsustainable. Conservative Members must ensure that we have that grown-up debate, and facilitate and lead it in their communities. Tory MPs sign early-day motions saying that we cannot have more housing in their areas, such as Cambridgeshire and East Sussex, but that is simply wrong and does not help to fulfil the potential of those areas .

Mrs. Lait: It is hardly appropriate for me to talk about East Sussex, but it has agreed to an increase in housing. It might not be what the Government want, but it is increasing housing there.

Mr. Wright: That is the fundamental point. Targets have been set so low, and 30 additional houses in a county is unacceptable, given the level of economic potential and development that could be there.

In conclusion—I realise that I am out of time, Mr. Cummings—I pledge to write to every hon. Member here.

First Solution Money Transfer Ltd

4.15pm

Mr. George Galloway (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Respect): The collapse of First Solution Money Transfer Ltd hit the community of the east end of London and elsewhere with all the force of a flood. It has devastated some of the poorest people in England: some of the lowest paid and some of the poorest housed, who live in the chilly shade of the hedge fund operators in the richest square mile on earth in the City of London and the gleaming spires of capitalism at Canary Wharf. Those people sweated from their brow to save what often may be small amounts to you and me, Mr. Cummings, but large amounts to them, and bigger amounts to those in Bangladesh, the poorest country in the world, to whom the money was destined to be sent.

No one will know the full scale of the losses until the Insolvency Service has concluded its forensic examination of the accounts, but at the moment the directors are claiming that £1.7 million is owed to 2,000 creditors. Those figures do not begin to paint the human picture of the suffering. One man from Manchester has lost £70,000, his life savings, which has brought him to the edge of despair. Another has lost the money that he had saved for retirement back in Bangladesh. In yet another case, money saved by a man for a whole year to buy essential medical treatment for his brother has gone missing. The tale of misery is represented among the strangers here, who are some of the poorest and some of the oldest victims of this collapse.

I was first alerted to the problems in the company almost four weeks ago. Agents working for First Solution in the Home Counties contacted me and said that money that they had taken in over the previous two months for transfer to Bangladesh—some £150,000—had for the most part failed to get there. They said that a meeting had been held between more than 40 agents and the directors of First Solution in the middle of May after money had stopped getting to Bangladesh. They had been told by the directors that there were problems, but that they would soon be put right. More than one month later, the situation had merely got worse as the amount of money owed to clients had grown.

As the evidence mounted that there were problems in the company, and that good money was being paid in after bad in large quantities daily, my response was to seek the authorities' assistance to find out what had gone wrong. I contacted the Financial Services Authority, but to my amazement was told that this financial service fell outside its remit, and that I would have to approach trading standards officers.

My office contacted trading standards officers at Tower Hamlets council with the evidence that had been presented to me, but they said that the matter was too big for them and that the police should be contacted. I sent a personal letter straight away to the borough commander in Tower Hamlets, again outlining the evidence of the very serious problems in the company, and of the suspicions, now widespread, of wrongdoing, and asked him to engage whatever agencies in the police were responsible for investigating the company. Commander Savill referred the matter to the local fraud office and an officer then contacted my office to say that he was

preparing a report to send to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, as it was in fact the regulating body and should carry out any investigation. This was some three days before the company finally ceased trading.

Under mounting media pressure—I commend the excellent investigative reporting of Ted Jeory of the *East London Advertiser*—the company seems to have engaged with its accountants and lawyers, and I believe the directors were advised that they were almost certainly trading as an insolvent company, which is a criminal offence. They were advised by their lawyer to instruct their agents to stop taking business, but to this day, many agents claim that they never received any such instruction. Early in the morning on 21 June, the directors posted a notice on their office in the London Muslim centre, saying that their office was closed until further notice.

That was no tin-pot business. It had grown from a £4 million turnover in its first year of operation, 2004, to an estimated £87 million turnover in 2006-07. That growth was achieved in several ways. First, the business offered higher exchange rates for lower fees and a quicker service to more outlying areas of Bangladesh than its rivals, in particular the banks, which are subject to financial security regulation. Secondly, with its headquarters located in the London Muslim centre next to the East London mosque, it was assiduously and ruthlessly promoted as a community service on the Bangladeshi TV station Channel S. Not coincidentally, Dr. Fazal Mahmood, the driving force behind First Solution, which also includes real estate, investment, travel and other services, was also the managing director of Channel S until the day before First Solution collapsed.

I have asked Ofcom, and I demand it again today through you, Mr. Cummings, to investigate whether there was a breach of the broadcasting code as a result of that close relationship and the apparent conflicts of interest, but so far Ofcom has not agreed to an inquiry. I want to know whether the adverts that ran interminably on Channel S for First Solution, even though the two companies shared Dr. Fazal Mahmood's services, were properly billed and paid for, and whether it was really commercial advertising or a relentless drive to get the TV station's audience to do their business with First Solution. Ofcom has a duty to the population of east London in that regard.

Mr. Cummings, you may be surprised to know—I was—that Dr. Fazal Mahmood was convicted in 2004 on two counts of the criminal offence of breaching section 84 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. A convicted criminal in 2004 was allowed to build up an £87 million business within three years because of the failure to put a fit and proper person regulation in place for people operating money transfer businesses.

The next point is even more interesting. Upon the collapse of the company, the directors appointed an insolvency firm, Panos Eliades, Franklin and Co., to register creditors, set up a creditors' meeting and advise on liquidation. Panos Eliades himself fronted and continues to front that operation. Mr. Eliades, however, was excluded from membership of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in 2000, and, in a legal dispute over debts with the boxer Lennox Lewis, a New York court and the High Court in London ruled that Mr. Eliades had comprehensively lied in order to avoid paying the debts that he was alleged to owe. His partner, Mr. Franklin, is qualified as an insolvency practitioner, although he is subject to restriction and monitoring by the Insolvency Practitioners Association. In a word, he is in "special measures".

One cannot help wondering why among all the insolvency firms operating in London, many of which have bombarded me with offers of help, the directors of First Solution managed to choose that one. There is a very important point to make. There is a great deal of anger in the British Bangladeshi community in the east end, and in Bangladesh itself about what has happened. There is a feeling, which I share, that it should be impossible for a money transfer company to lose money. After all, it merely takes money from Peter and promises to transfer it to Paul. In the east end, there has been much rumour and speculation that something criminal must have happened to that money.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has rightly identified some of the gaps in the regulatory framework. A constituent of mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire has also lost £70,000, and that was in late June. He tells me that he spoke to one of the directors, Shah Mohammad Abdul Hadi, before emitting the money, and he was assured that everything was fine. If it looks like a fraud, sounds like a fraud and quacks like a fraud, it is a fraud; and that is a matter for the police.

Mr. Galloway: Quite so. I shall come to precisely those points in a minute.

The investigation will continue, but any investigation must carry credibility with the community who have lost their money. Normally with the collapse of a company, the investigation would be undertaken in the first place by the insolvency practitioners who were engaged by the directors and confirmed by a creditors' meeting. There is no way that Panos Eliades, Franklin and Co., with its colourful history, possibly has the credibility to conduct such an investigation.

I am very pleased that as a result of the huge political pressure that has been brought to bear in this case, members of the Limehouse financial investigation team of the Metropolitan police executed search warrants on the headquarters of First Solution one week after the collapse. I would have much preferred the action to have been taken earlier, and I should remind the Minister that I alerted the police to the possibility of fraud three days before the company collapsed. However, I have been assured by the police that they believe that they have secured all the electronic records they need to conduct a proper investigation, and I hope that that is the case.

The company's four directors, or perhaps it is three as one seems to have resigned, have been putting out a robust defence of their honesty. I am no expert on the international financial markets, but there is a problem with their explanation. The delays that they hold responsible for the difficulties that the business faced would in fact have benefited the company, because the long-term exchange rate trend was for the Bangladeshi currency to fall against the pound. They have claimed that people were not transferring the money from the agent to them quickly enough, and that in the delay, there had been a loss on the currency market. However, the taka has been falling like a stone compared with the pound. In

[Mr. Galloway]

just three years its value has fallen by a half, so any delays would have benefited, not suppressed the company's profitability.

The directors' account of events does not have any credibility at the moment. Moreover, an increasing number of people are coming to me with concerns that their investments in property in Bangladesh through First Solution have again not reached the other end. That situation includes Britannia Property Services Ltd, trading as Britannia Samana, which has among its directors both the chair of Channel S, the man now known—he changed his name—as Mohammed Mahee Ferdaush, and Dr. Fazal Mahmood.

There are some questions that must be answered. When were the losses that brought the company down first incurred? When was the informal overdraft facility with Southeast bank arranged, and how much was it for? What role did the informal overdraft facility from Southeast bank play in covering up the losses? Why was the overdraft facility withdrawn? When would a reasonable person conclude that the company had become insolvent? Is there any evidence of money paid in for transfer being diverted to other uses, including speculation? Did Mohammed Mosaddek Ali Falu, previously a Member of the Bangladeshi Parliament, now in jail in Bangladesh on money laundering charges, use First Solution to launder money from Bangladesh to the UK, and pay higher than official rates in taka? Was First Solution depositing UK sterling into Falu-nominated UK accounts, and was Falu supplying takas in Bangladesh?

Was the drying-up of money-laundered taka, as a result of the anti-corruption drive by the caretaker Government in Bangladesh, the reason why First Solution made losses? Were any significant payments made from First Solution Money Transfer Ltd client accounts to unsecured creditors—including to any directors of First Solution or other companies of which they are directors—at any time in the past three months, before the company stopped trading and after the withdrawal of the informal overdraft facility?

Margaret Moran (Luton, South) (Lab): In that comprehensive investigation and exposé, for the many millions of members of the Bangladeshi community in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine, and indeed throughout the UK, one of the questions must be—although we must ask what can be done to prevent it from happening again—what immediate relief can be offered. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in thanking Baroness Pola Uddin and the Sir William Beveridge Foundation. They are doing their utmost to help some of the crisis cases. Many in the audience here and downstairs, as well as in the community, have seen their hard-won life savings vanish in an instant. We have a collective duty to help and support them.

Mr. Galloway: Quite so. In fact, we are not only demanding help for crisis cases. As I will mention in a minute, we are demanding that everyone who has lost money gets it back.

Whatever the outcome of the investigation, the burgeoning area of financial services needs more regulation. Money transfer companies receive a licence from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which is charged with monitoring money laundering, but they are not monitored for financial security. It is a big hole in the regulatory regime.

The Department for International Development was among the agencies after 9/11 that pushed out of the picture the informal networks previously used to transfer money to countries such as Bangladesh and insisted on the move to a more formal network. Some £7.5 million was paid to Bangladesh's state bank to encourage Bangladeshi authorities to go down that road. That is the context for the emergence and extremely rapid growth of First Solution, but without proper regulation, the danger of a collapse was ever-present. Having pushed people into the sector while knowing that it was not regulated—having encouraged the process of money transfer—the Government have an obligation to help the people who have lost money in the collapse.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Galloway: No, if the hon. Lady will forgive me. I am running out of time, and I want the Minister to have time to reply.

I met the Minister, who was most gracious, and she rejected direct help on the grounds that it would encourage moral hazard. But if the Government encouraged the system that failed to protect the customer, the Government have the moral obligation to help. As for regulation, it needs to be considered as a matter of urgency and proposals must be introduced. I am glad that she said that that will be done, but I stress that the regulation must include a "fit and proper" test for directors.

The Minister has agreed Government assistance in establishing a fund to raise money to pay back the many poor people who have lost money. It is early days, and I understand that the agents who have lost so much business and standing in the community are themselves trying to organise a rescue package. I have begun writing to the heads of major City institutions to ask them to contribute to the relief fund that the Minister and I discussed. If Ministers, led by the Prime Minister, added their voices to the call and led the House by example, we could raise the necessary funds swiftly to pay everybody back.

I described where most of the victims live. They live in the cold shadow of some of the richest companies, banks and finance houses in the world. If the Government put their back into it and tug at the consciences of the hedge fund managers, private equity speculators and city slickers who got £8.8 billion in Christmas bonuses six months ago—if the Government put the arm on some of the richest people in England to help some of the poorest, who are the victims of the crash—something can be rescued from the ashes. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has in mind.

4.34 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Kitty Ussher): I am grateful for your chairmanship, Mr. Cummings. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Mr. Galloway) on securing this debate—it would be unladylike for me to add "while he is still able", but it is nice to see him in the House today. I thank him and all hon. Members who have spoken for their contributions.

I start by expressing my sympathy for those affected by the closure of First Solution Money Transfer Ltd, including many of my own constituents as well as those of the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members here today. Before I mention local leaders in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, I pay tribute on a personal note to Councillor Shah Hussain in mine, who has done excellent work in representing the Bangladeshi community's views. I realise that many of those affected worked hard to earn the money that they sent through the company, and that many in Bangladesh who did not receive money were badly in need of it. I welcome the efforts of all those who have taken the trouble to support people who have suffered as a result of the company's closure.

4.35 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.50 pm

On resuming—

Kitty Ussher: The Government's first step was to attempt to understand the situation and the concerns of those affected. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness and I have met a number of representatives of the local community. In addition to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, I want to mention in particular the grass-roots work of Councillor Denise Jones, who is leader of the council, and of Rushanara Ali and Ayub Ali, who have worked hard to raise the profile of the issue and to make representations to Government. As well as thanking the Minister for Competitiveness, I want to extend my particular thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend for Poplar and Canning Town (Jim Fitzpatrick), who was here for the earlier part of the debate, and, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran), Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green, of whom more later.

Of course, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow for the trouble that he took, as he mentioned in his opening remarks, to bring community representatives to meet me last week to express their concerns and aid my personal understanding of the issues. I want to draw the attention of the entire community to the written ministerial statement that I laid before the House last week, which set out our initial response.

In response to complaints about the circumstances of First Solution's closure, the companies investigation branch of the Insolvency Service is also examining the facts of the case, and has been in liaison with the local police as well as keeping trading standards officers and other regulators informed of its investigation.

Although I was interested to hear the points about criminality and suggestions of the fit-and-proper-person nature—or otherwise—of various directors who were involved, as well as the suggestions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) about fraud, and the points about money laundering, they are best dealt with by the investigation that is being undertaken. It is standard practice that if the CIB finds any allegations that the law has been broken in any of those regards, it will pass them on to the police, with whom it is already in contact. Time will tell in answer to those points.

The CIB recognises the uncertainty felt by those affected by the closure of First Solution, and it is working as quickly as possible to reach conclusions and making steady progress. Obviously, it needs to be thorough, so it is unable to give a precise time for the completion of its investigations, but it is fully aware of the need to progress as swiftly and thoroughly as possible.

I also realise that the uncertainty must be difficult for those who have been affected by the case, and that they will understandably be frustrated that First Solution's voluntary liquidation means that there is no firm time frame in which they might find out when, or if, money can be reclaimed from the company's remaining assets, which is, of course, theoretically possible.

Anne Main: Many of us have constituents who are affected by this, and they need to know what to do next. I should be grateful if the Minister would outline the importance of registering their loss with the liquidator, so that they do not merely attend meetings where everyone tells them what a dreadful thing this is, but not where to go next. I know that Members in the Chamber today have met representatives from those groups who keep going to meetings but are uncertain what to do next.

Kitty Ussher: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning that point. I was just coming to the two things that the people who are affected should do. First, as I laid out in last week's written ministerial statement, they should register their interests with the insolvency practitioners who are the liquidators. The most recent information is that a liquidator has not yet been formally appointed, although that may have changed recently, but the company has told us that it intends to appoint as liquidator Panos Eliades, Franklin and Co., and the telephone number 020 8815 4000 was given in my ministerial statement. As a first step, potentially affected people should register their interest there. If assets can be returned to them, the liquidators will ensure that they are in the right place in the queue for that.

The second matter is the charitable response. With my whole heart, I want to say how delighted I am that the Sir William Beveridge Foundation has independently agreed to provide a charitable response. A helpline is in the process of being established—I understand that the number has been agreed, but that BT has not formally connected it. We will make that public next week, and everyone, all over the country, who feels that they should be eligible for a charitable response, should contact that charity, which has its own processes for checking who is eligible and who is not. It is an established organisation and I am delighted that it has come forward in these sad circumstances. The foundation will be seeking corporate and individual donations. I do not know who it is contacting, but the hon. Gentleman had some sensible suggestions. I shall certainly encourage the foundation to seek the widest possible donations to provide a substantial fund.

I am sure that we will all want to thank Baroness Uddin for her role in setting up the support fund, as well as the many others who have been involved—I know that an ad hoc advisory group set itself up—

Margaret Moran: As a member of the ad hoc advisory group, I stress that the criteria that will be used to determine eligibility will be determined by the

[Margaret Moran]

charitable trust, not by politicians or others. Will the Minister acknowledge that although this tragedy affects the Bangladeshi community because of this company, it is important that we explain to others from other communities who use money transfer agencies—there are many others, including in my constituency—that they need to be sure about the terms on which they are using the agencies?

Kitty Ussher: Those are extremely important points. The independence of the charity is crucial and it is important to point out to individual constituents the need to be vigilant and to check the status of the companies with which they transact, although I understand that it is difficult to do so. I am about to move on to the issue of regulation, but I have one final word on the charitable response. It is clear in my mind—I have said this privately to the hon. Gentleman—that as a Government, our response to this tragic situation should be the same as our response to Farepak. In that case, we were delighted to say that the Family Fund set up a charitable response, and in this case we are delighted to see that the Sir William Beveridge Foundation has taken up the mantle. I shall encourage my constituents to get in touch, and I hope that all hon. Members will do the same. It might be a couple of days before we have the final details in place, although I stand to be corrected by members of the ad hoc advisory group.

The fund will provide immediate support, I hope, to those who have been affected in this incident, but I know that we are all concerned about ways of preventing closures like this in the future. Even before the situation was known, the Government had committed to regulate money transfer companies under the payment services directive, which we agreed the terms of and negotiated on behalf of the UK at a European level earlier this year.

The directive will require money transfer operators to be subject to financial regulation. It will introduce a prudential authorisation regime for these companies, which will be tiered according to the size of the operators. It will also provide, where appropriate, for customers' funds to be ring-fenced from other creditors' in the event of insolvency. Furthermore, all operators must abide by new conduct-of-business rules, which concern the provision of adequate information to customers to ensure that there is transparency about the services that customers receive. There are also liability requirements, to provide greater legal certainty for customers in the event, for example, that a payment transaction goes wrong.

We will be publishing a consultation document on the implementation of the directive later this year. I encourage all those who have been involved with the First Solution experience to respond to that, and we will be seeking views from all interested stakeholders on how we can implement it most effectively, taking into account the Government's better regulation agenda. We will also take into account lessons learned from First Solution.

Regulation is not fail-safe. It cannot guarantee that firms will not become insolvent or misbehave, and it will always need to be complemented by customer vigilance, good corporate practice and genuine competition in the marketplace. We believe that if it had been in place, that would have been a better framework than the one that we have.

I want to mention the role of the Department for International Development in supporting from the other side the role of money transfer companies. We have set up a remittances and payments partnership project with the central bank of Bangladesh to improve the speed and security with which migrants are able to remit funds home. We also fund the UK remittances taskforce to promote greater transparency and competition, and better information in the UK remittances market.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a couple of other points. I heard what he said about Ofcom, which is an independent body and so it is up to it to decide what to do. I am sure that it is aware and is investigating the representations that have been made. In the last few seconds—

John Cummings (in the Chair): Order. We must now move on to the next debate.

Manorlands Hospice (Oxenhope)

5 pm

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): I should like to talk about the funding of the Sue Ryder Care hospice in Oxenhope. I was first going to congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister, but she is not here yet. I am afraid that there has been some confusion. Anyhow, I congratulate her on her recent appointment as a Minister in the Department of Health. No other person would have been as appropriate to do the job.

I am sure that every Member of the House has a particular charitable body or organisation in their constituency that attracts a special fondness. In Keighley, the Sue Ryder Care Manorlands hospice in Oxenhope has a special place in the hearts of my constituents. Perhaps that is due to the hospice's incredible work. Manorlands has a 16-bed, specialist palliative care unit, providing consultant-led, specialist nursing and care services; a palliative care community team that transfers the hospice's expertise into the community, including at a palliative care drop-in centre in Keighley; a day therapy unit enabling people living with a terminal illness to access expertise and services from the comfort of their own homes; and a bereavement and counselling service providing care and support to families and carers before and after someone dies.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Cummings. I am sorry, but we do not have a Minister here. The whole point of an Adjournment debate is that a Minister can reply.

John Cummings (in the Chair): I understand that the Minister is on her way and that it is in order for the debate to continue without her.

Mr. Curry: Of what purpose is that, then? What is the point without a Minister? *[Interruption.]*

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I apologise for my lateness, Mr. Cummings.

John Cummings (in the Chair): It has been a rather peculiar afternoon with Divisions.

Mrs. Cryer: Perhaps the fondness for Manorlands is due to the professionalism and care of the staff who work there. Anyone who has any contact with Manorlands, as a patient or carer, is deeply impressed by the level of care, with dignity, that is provided. Perhaps it is also because of the stunningly beautiful surroundings in Oxenhope, a place that brings a tranquillity, comfort and dignity that every one of us deserves in our final weeks of life.

Perhaps it could be because of the holistic approach, which is the ethos of Manorlands and of all Sue Ryder Care's hospices. Manorlands' vision of "'care that liberates life" means that it cares for a person's physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs, and is dedicated to ensuring that people get the best from their lives while living with chronic and terminal conditions and illnesses.

I believe that the fondness is due to the extent of the expertise offered at Manorlands through its consultant-led palliative care team, which incorporates specialist nurses who care for people not just in the hospice but in the community. Also, the hospital does not just care for people with cancer but is part of a charity that specialises in providing neurological care and support for people living with conditions such as multiple sclerosis, stroke, Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, Huntingdon's disease, brain injury and dementia.

Whatever the reason for the fondness, there can be no doubt that Sue Ryder Care's Manorlands is vital to the people of Keighley and the surrounding areas. However, as is always the case, there is a price to pay. Along with the hospice and the voluntary sector in general, I realise that funds are not infinite. There is not a bottomless pit, and a simple wish list of demands is not realistic. In this case, Manorlands is not campaigning for something that is unrealistic or exaggerated; it is simply asking for what is proportionate and should be due. The statutory commissioners should pay the true cost of the services that they purchase.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and on all the work that she does in supporting Manorlands, which, as she well knows, is close to the hearts of my constituents. I know that a lot of her constituents, like a lot of mine, raise considerable funds for Manorlands and put an awful lot of effort into doing so. Does she agree that it is only fitting, given their efforts, for primary care trusts not just in our area but in North Yorkshire to pay their fair share to enable Manorlands to continue to give the high-quality service that she mentioned?

Mrs. Cryer: That is the very point that made me decide to seek the debate, and I shall come to it.

The basic principle is vital. Sue Ryder Care, as highlighted in its "We Care: Who Pays?" campaign, is paying £7 million a year to cover statutory shortfalls in funding. Six million pounds of that is for palliative care, which means that voluntary donations, instead of being used to develop much-needed new and innovative services, are plugging the gap between what the PCTs and social services pay and the real cost of providing care.

I welcome the Government's support for the hospice movement and palliative care in general. The additional £50 million made available for specialist palliative care for adults has made a real difference, and the announcement in April that a further £40 million was to be allocated as capital funding for the refurbishment of adult hospices, which has assisted 146 hospices, was particularly welcome. I also appreciate the position of the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis). He stated in a written answer on 8 May:

> "The level of public funding a hospice receives is a matter for local negotiation between the local primary care trust (PCT), who are responsible for commissioning and funding palliative care services locally, and the hospice. We are currently developing an adult End of Life Care Strategy, which will consider funding for adult hospices and other adult end of life care services."—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2007; Vol. 460, c. 149W.]

The difficulty, however, for Manorlands and other hospices is what appears to be a lack of transparency in how different PCTs fund the care.

I appreciate the fact that, as part of the end-of-life care strategy, PCTs have been asked to undertake a baseline review of their end-of-life care services, and should therefore determine the true cost of providing end-of-life care, but organisations such as Manorlands face uncertainty about funding. In negotiations at the

[Mrs. Cryer]

local level with PCTs, Manorlands must operate within the parameters given. Indeed, in "Improving financial relationships with the third sector: Guidance to funders and purchasers", produced by the Treasury in 2006, it was suggested:

> "There is no reason why service procurers should disallow the inclusion of relevant overhead costs in bids. Furthermore, funders or purchasers should not flatly reject or refuse to fund fully costed bids. Funding bodies must recognise that it is legitimate for third sector organisations to recover the appropriate level of overhead costs associated with the provision of a particular service."

The Charity Commission, in its report of 2005, "Policy Statement on Charities and Public Service Delivery", argued:

> "Trustees have a duty to use charity assets as effectively as possible. Charities should always aim to recover the full cost of delivering services for public authorities, including administrative and overhead or 'core' costs. It is reasonable for a charity to expect an authority to fund its full costs. Full cost recovery is supported by government policy, as set out in the Compact and its good practice code on funding and procurement.
>
> We recognise that, in practice, many charities struggle to obtain full cost recovery. This is a matter of concern for both the sector and the Commission."

However, Manorlands is not seeking full recovery. The cost in 2006 to Manorlands of providing service to 640 patients and their families was a little short of £2 million. Seventy-six per cent. of the patients were referred to Manorlands from within the boundaries of the Bradford and Airedale PCT. For that service, the PCT paid Manorlands £640,000. Twenty-four per cent. of the patients lived within the boundaries of the North Yorkshire and York PCT. No agreement has yet been concluded on payment by the PCT, but it appears that something in the order of £140,000 may be forthcoming.

Manorlands is not seeking 100 per cent. recovery, as it realises that commissioners are not able or willing to purchase all of its services. That is why Sue Ryder Care is a charity and so can use vital voluntary funds to pay for valuable additional services such as bereavement care, which makes a real difference to families and bereaved carers. In the interim, it is requesting 50 per cent. recovery from two PCTs that commission its specialist service. However, the Bradford and Airedale PCT falls short of the 50 per cent. threshold by £120,000, achieving just 87 per cent. of the target, while the North Yorkshire and York PCT falls short by £110,000, at just 54 per cent. of its target of 50 per cent. total recovery.

When Manorlands first raised the issue with me, I was told of the reluctance of the North Yorkshire and York PCT to discuss the matter. Appreciating the demands on PCTs, I was sure that there was a perceived, not a definite, reluctance. However, although I have finally managed to organise a date to meet the chief executive, I, too, have experienced such reluctance. I very much hope, however, that when I do meet the chief executive early next month, the discussion will prove to be more constructive.

I am sure that Members of the House will appreciate my personal and particular interest in matters associated with palliative care. Anyone who has experienced the ravages of a terminal or chronic illness, either as a patient or as a carer, will appreciate the value of specialist, holistic care and support. From a purely financial point of view, the last chapter in someone's life can be the most expensive to the various agencies involved. A coherent and well-funded palliative care strategy is vital for any PCT if it is to avoid expensive increases in unscheduled admissions to hospital, longer lengths of hospital stay and discomfort to patients. Failure to ensure that Manorlands can effectively provide the service that it specialises in would be a false economy.

More important than the financial argument, perhaps, is the question of emotional well-being and dignity. My second late husband, John, chose in his last few weeks to be at home. Palliative care was provided through the Bradford Hospice at Home team, which included excellent input from Macmillan nurses. We were also given night-time care, which helped enormously. Towards the end, it was John's decision to be moved to the hospice nearest to our home, the wonderful Marie Curie hospice in Bradford. It is that experience that allows me to understand and appreciate what Manorlands specialises in and must be allowed to continue doing.

Neither I nor Manorlands is making wild demands for funding from a limited and stretched pot. We recognise the Government's commitment to palliative care and to the voluntary sector, but the lack of clarity regarding the funding arrangements of PCTs needs to be addressed and resolved. Manorlands delivers its services free. Whatever the PCTs commission but fail to pay for has to be met through donations and the excellent fund-raising events organised by the dedicated staff at Manorlands and the volunteers in the two other constituencies concerned. Surely it is only proportionate and fair that PCTs should budget for at least 50 per cent. of the services that have been provided.

I appreciate the Government's stance that such matters be negotiated locally, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree that direction needs to be given to ensure that PCTs do, indeed, act fairly, and thus that Sue Ryder Care Manorlands hospice will, as I hope, be able to continue to provide exemplary service for so many people.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I thank you, Mr. Cummings, and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer). I apologise for my late arrival. A large number of people were leaving the Chamber, and it proved impossible to get through the crowd in time. I hope that hon. Members will accept that apology. I congratulate my dear hon. Friend on presenting her case with her usual courage and dignity. I am sure that all Members felt for her as she expressed herself as she did. I would like to pay tribute to the 1.3 million staff who work for the national health service, in particular the staff in the Bradford and Airedale area who have made an enormous contribution to improving the local NHS.

The hospice movement is close to me, too. As a former nurse, I have spent some time working in hospices and received some excellent training there. Cicely Saunders, the founder of the hospice movement and of the first hospice, St. Christopher's, said that society should be judged by how it treats its very young, its very old, its sick, its poor and its dying. She said:

> "A society which shuns the dying must have an incomplete philosophy."

I am sure that all hon. Members would agree with that.

We greatly appreciate the work done by the voluntary sector, which provides some three quarters of the available specialist palliative care services. We are indebted to all hospices and charities for the work that they do in supporting not only people with life-threatening illnesses but their families, carers and friends. As centres of excellence, hospices have for several decades shared their knowledge and expertise with local NHS staff. For example, during the £6 million programme to improve the training of district nurses in the principles and practice of palliative care, many of the participants received their training through programmes run by local hospices, and clinical placements based in them.

The Bradford and Airedale palliative care co-ordination service is a good local example of the partnership between hospices and the NHS. The service takes the lead in planning and developing integrated palliative care services, which include continuing education for health and social care professionals in the important area of end-of-life care. Manorlands hospice is one of several local providers that deliver continuing education. As part of a local network of educators, it shares its expertise with other professionals, formally and very often informally. That important work is not often discussed, so it is important that I should mention it today.

My hon. Friend spoke of high-quality care at the Marie Curie hospice in Bradford and at Manorlands. Sadly, she had personal experience of receiving that care. Some patients receive excellent care at the end of life, but, unfortunately, many do not. In a recent Healthcare Commission report on complaints about the NHS, 54 per cent. of hospital complaints were about care surrounding death.

Health and social care professionals often do not discuss death and dying with patients. I am pleased to have responsibility for maternity services in my new role. The first few minutes of life are very important, but I would say that the last few minutes are equally important. If the last part of life is planned for with properly trained staff and professionals and the wider community, it can often become a different experience.

Patient preferences for care are often not elicited. Their care needs are not always adequately assessed and care is not always planned or reviewed. Recent surveys of the general public have shown that most people's first preference is to die at home. Patients need to be offered that choice. My colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health, Professor Ari Darzi, is reviewing the pathways right the way through from birth to end of life. The end-of-life strategy aims to offer patients a choice. It will deliver increased choice to all adult patients, regardless of their condition, about where they live and die, and provide them with support to make their choice possible. For the first time, a strategy for end-of-life care services has been developed. It will be key to helping commissioners and providers bring about improvements in end-of-life care services at a local level.

I am so pleased to learn that Sue Ryder Care at Manorlands is represented on the working group that is currently developing a strategy. It is anticipated that the advisory board and working groups will report to Ministers with their recommendations by the end of 2007. I welcome my hon. Friend's contribution to that strategy, and she must feel that it is open for her to do so.

To support the implementation of the strategy, an operating framework highlights the importance of PCTs undertaking baseline reviews of their end-of-life care service. Guidance to PCTs on the reviews highlights the importance of engaging with all stakeholders, including local service providers, patients and carers. Leadership is absolutely essential from the people who know best—from the hospice movement and those involved in the wider social package. They must encourage PCTs and chief executives fully to engage their community and to consult on this vital issue. I am sure that Members of Parliament can also play an important role.

On the NHS cancer plan that my hon. Friend mentioned, £50 million per annum for specialist palliative care for adults, including hospices, has been delivered. More than half the new money went to the voluntary sector, mostly to hospices. That has funded 44 new palliative medicine consultants, 172 new clinical nurse specialists, and 46 new specialist palliative care beds. The plan has increased NHS funding for specialist palliative care by about 40 per cent. In 2004, funding for adult hospices averaged 38 per cent., which means that expenditure was up from 28 per cent. in 2000. Progress has been made, but there is much more to do. The NHS cancer plan has contributed to a 15 per cent. increase in all funding for specialist palliative care compared with 2000 levels.

Manorlands has provided high-quality specialist palliative care to people in Airedale, Bradford and Craven for more than 30 years, and it now cares for more than 600 people a year. My hon. Friend raised the issue of funding and I understand that funding for hospices is a major concern for voluntary organisations. The average funding figure for adult hospices is 38 per cent., and I am pleased to say that the figure for Manorlands is 41 per cent., which is of course above the average. It is essential that the primary care trust works with the hospice to negotiate the funding, and I would be very pleased to give any assistance that I can to my hon. Friend in achieving that.

Good commissioning must acknowledge what the voluntary sector has to offer. Likewise, the voluntary sector must engage with commissioners to make them aware of what they have to offer. As I mentioned at the start of my contribution, the educational role that they play could be put much more into the forefront of their minds. The emphasis should therefore be on effective negotiation between contracting partners when contracts and service-level agreements come up for renewal.

How do we put a cost on end-of-life care? The end-of-life care strategy is examining the true cost of providing end-of-life care. That figure will estimate the cost of the services provided across the board by both the NHS and the voluntary sector in the last three to six months of a patient's life. As I am sure hon. Members realise, that is not easy to do, but, with proper negotiation on an end-of-life strategy that looks at the last three to six months, I believe that it is possible. That figure will provide a base from which to consider future funding needs for end-of-life care services in the NHS and in the voluntary sector.

The local primary care trusts fully acknowledge and recognise the vital contributions made by hospices. Bradford and Airedale's funding for this year has not been finalised, but I am assured that it will be consistent

[Ann Keen]

with last year, plus an inflation uplift. North Yorkshire and York primary care trust is reviewing the way in which it allocates funding.

When we consider the issue of hospice care we must look at the whole multidisciplinary team. My hon. Friend stated that she used almost a hospice at home for John. The multidisciplinary team offers a range of services. Some patients are able to go home for weekends; others stay for one or two weeks to enable their families to have a rest or a holiday. Convalescence is offered to people who have undergone radiotherapy and chemotherapy treatment. The community team takes its specialist palliative skills to patients at home, provides support to carers, and enables the patient to live as full and active a life as possible. When I last practised in the late 1980s and early 1990s, my experience as a community nurse showed that changes in technology allow pain control to be managed at home, and that that makes a huge difference to quality of life. Effective and good pain management enables someone at the end of life to communicate with their family, and to continue to work, in many cases, almost up to the end. The skilled multidisciplinary team is fully aware of how to carry out very specialised pain management.

A local GP from my hon. Friend's area has said:

"Local GPs in Airedale value the support given to our patients by Manorlands. Their staff are fully integrated into primary health care teams' working and together they enable us to offer a high standard of care to patients".

GP services are vital if a patient is to have the right to come home. Many patients do not have that right because GP services in their local area do not meet the demands that that would create. Caring for someone dying at home is highly demanding work. Again, I pay tribute to the absolute professionalism of staff—from the voluntary sector through to the highest consultant—some of whom also feel that palliative care should be delivered at home and are willing to go to patients' houses.

We are conducting a consultation to establish the future needs of the local community. I am aware that the hospice is currently conducting that consultation and is considering what services and facilities will best meet those needs. It is commendable that the community will have an opportunity to have a say in how the service can change and meet future demands. Hearing the views of people, involving partners and focusing on outcomes is essential to our reform agenda. That means good commissioning, and good commissioning must acknowledge what the voluntary sector has to offer. Equally, it is essential that in every community and every part of the country, the voluntary sector engages with commissioners to make them aware of what they have to offer. Yes, devolved decisions to primary care trusts is the way forward, but that does not mean that we cannot have leadership from my Department to encourage PCTs and chief executives to engage in good commissioning.

I shall end my contribution with another reference to Cicely Saunders. She had courage, and her courage was that of the visionary. She saw beyond the limited vista of the medical establishment to pioneer a movement that has revolutionised the way that terminally ill people are cared for. Hospital acute wards are not the place for people to have the last few weeks, days or hours of their life. A proper area where palliative care is delivered with dignity, and with respect not only to the person concerned but the family, is essential for the future. I am encouraged by other hon. Members being here today with my hon. Friend, and I know that we will work together on an end-of-life strategy. I look forward to those discussions with her.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 19 July 2007

[SIR JOHN BUTTERFILL *in the Chair*]

Anti-Semitism

[Relevant documents: Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, and the Government response thereto, Cm 7059.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Liz Blackman.]*

2.30 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I thank the Government for their response to the inquiry, particularly because they have taken the unusual step of issuing a Command Paper, which gives a clear indication that they have taken seriously the work of the 14 MPs who looked into this issue for some significant time. The previous Prime Minister, Mr. Blair, personally met the all-party group on anti-Semitism, and the current Prime Minister, before he took office, reiterated the Government's position unequivocally during two speeches that I was privileged to witness, including an important after-dinner speech for British Jewry.

A vital factor of Parliament's work is that it has taken the lead on this issue. That may sound like a trite, side point, but it is not, for reasons of both principle and practicality. The point of principle is that when dealing with racism—anti-Semitism is a form of racism as abhorrent as any other—one should not simply throw issues to the Executive to lead and run with, but accept one's own responsibilities. All Members present will want to hear clear and coherent responses from the Minister about tangible developments from the Government, because the Executive have a vital and important role to play. However, we must all tackle racism in our lives, parties and constituencies.

A great strength that emanates from the report is that the main political parties, which are represented here today—the Liberal Democrats, the Conservative party and the Labour party—have been prepared to tackle their own problems with anti-Semitism. To me, that is as important a step forward as any other. It is not that people have not tackled such problems in the past; however, the three main parties have in their own ways—and in an essentially unified way—looked in their own back yards and been prepared to challenge such issues with their own colleagues and institutions first and foremost. That is the most encouraging development, and it reinforces the model of Parliament taking the lead.

I hope that the Minister agrees that the all-party group's methodology of taking a cross-party approach, mirroring that of a Select Committee, and having a group of unbiased parliamentarians assessing the situation and coming to unbiased conclusions, gives the report respectability and removes party bias. The report and its recommendations are therefore particularly important to both the Government and wider society.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) (Con): For the sake of completeness and because of her role and its relevance, given her background in a troubled Province, we should record the membership of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), who played a big part in the report and who knows something about the consequences of intolerance.

John Mann: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments. It is not parliamentary terminology to call him my hon. Friend, but he certainly is a good and close friend from our work on this issue, which demonstrates the importance of cross-party co-operation. The involvement of Northern Ireland was certainly a vital factor, as was the fact that Members who had no describable vested interest participated in the process, thus giving it authenticity and creating a benchmark. One could argue with the details—one always can—but the benchmark exists for the future. People can look at the work and ask, "What is Parliament saying on anti-Semitism?" or "What is Parliament's view on what is happening in the outside world, and what should be done about it?" That benchmark can be used by us and others and will exist for years to come. It is a vital tool, which will allow us to hold the Government to greater account.

Albert Einstein said that

"implementation is the vehicle of genius".

Implementation is the difficult part with any such report. Identifying the problems is one issue—and there are many, because anti-Semitism is a growing problem—but implementing recommendations from the report in respect of which there is dialogue with the Government is a far greater one. I do not intend to spend any time going through the report, because both it and the Government's response are available to read, and I shall not waste Parliament's time by going through those issues again, although other hon. Members will need to home in on some of the specifics in their contributions.

I want to address two points in detail, the first of which concerns civic society and its institutions. The report gave a message beyond Parliament about what society should be doing about anti-Semitism. I shall give two examples of where there could be progress, on which I shall be interested to hear the Minister's views. Secondly, there are some specifics about Government implementation that I would like the Minister to clarify or repeat.

The examples from civic society include what I consider to be priorities—the worlds of sport and football. Yesterday, I convened a meeting of the football world about anti-Semitism in football, as a starting point. There is clearly a role for the Government regarding anti-Semitism in football, but not a leading role because the football authorities and the football world itself must deal with those problems. At the meeting, we discussed in detail the growth of anti-Semitism in community football and football across the country. We also discussed the problems in the professional game, in which there is anti-Semitism on the terraces and beyond.

There was one major, encouraging factor and one negative factor at the meeting. The encouraging factor was the involvement of the England supporters associations. A range of active England supporters from official supporters' bodies were at the meeting, some of whom are stewards at local clubs, such as Millwall and Southampton. They gave good examples of best practice when dealing with racism and anti-Semitism in professional football. They are prepared, as volunteers and spectators

[John Mann]

within the sport, to participate with intelligence. The number of England fans who attended was one of the most encouraging things I have seen since I have been involved in chairing the all-party group in the past two years. It gave a powerful message that many people are our allies in dealing with racism: people beyond the normal, expected sources—out there in the world we know well. I hesitate to use the term "ordinary world", but I am talking about the world outside. The practical suggestions from there were incredibly valuable.

The negative thing was that some football clubs chose not to attend—I know that they must be very busy. I agreed at the meeting and put it on the record that I would write to those clubs offering them the opportunity to participate in the debate. Representatives of Arsenal football club, West Ham United and Chelsea, who were unfortunately too busy to attend yesterday's meeting—unlike the Football Association, Tottenham Hotspur, the England fans and many others—will get the opportunity to participate in a debate. They have been written to, as have Leeds United, which I know well and which have been mentioned on a number of occasions. Those four clubs have been written to today to entice them into the debate on anti-Semitism. Given that that is now on the record, I am sure that they will be keen to participate. We are looking for an important section of civil society to take the lead. We as parliamentarians can play our role in assisting that process.

The second example from civic society is the universities. I know that others will want to talk about the universities' so-called boycott. Of course, there is no boycott and there will be no boycott; it is a misnomer given by a group of people who have time on their hands. They have nobody to negotiate on the real issues affecting their work force, which is perhaps why their membership seems to be going down rather than up and will continue to do so if they choose to pick on the frivolities of life, such as intellectual debates, rather than the real stuff of life, such as the terms and conditions of their members.

Without question it is the role of university leaders to ensure that every student, including every Jewish student, can work in an atmosphere on campus that encourages study. We can get hung up on statistics. I do not look for violent attacks to quantify the problem on campus—I assess the smell and sight on campus, what people hear there, and what we in the community call antisocial behaviour. Those are not things that, in themselves, would ever warrant police involvement, and "atmosphere" is probably the best word to describe them. The accumulation of such elements means that people are not happy in what they are doing, or are making choices because of what they perceive they will have to go through. That is a growing problem on our university campuses.

David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the real problem is the reluctance on the part of some Jewish students on some of our campuses to report incidents of anti-Semitism to the university authorities, because of a perceived feeling that there will not be a sympathetic response in some cases? Has he encountered that phenomenon?

John Mann: I thank my hon. Friend, who represents two universities in his constituency, for his pertinent comments. That issue has been well reported; indeed, an interesting dialogue with the football authorities took place in that regard. The Football Association has good reporting systems, but the question of how well they worked was part of the debate. Perhaps an even more important question is whether people know that they exist and trust them. I think that the FA is in the lead in civic society in this matter, and, ironically, the universities could learn something from it.

The universities need to deal with these issues coherently. For example, one of the ways in which antisocial behaviour—the atmosphere on campus, or what I would call anti-Semitism—can occur is simply through silence. Shunning and ignoring a student is part of deliberate and calculated discrimination. How can one complain about that, and what would be the criteria for making a complaint? Could one go to the police and say, "No one is talking to me. I demand that you take action"? Clearly, one cannot do that.

We now have some expertise in this country—perhaps more than other countries—through the way in which we have begun to tackle antisocial behaviour. We need to involve the same ethos on campus and we need some of the same imagination. The lead must come from the university authorities, and I call on them in that regard. They have been more elusive in being prepared to meet than the football authorities—I find that strange—and significantly more elusive than Ministers or Opposition parties, which have always been happy and quick to meet. The universities have managed to duck meetings, despite a lengthy and significant debate on the matter in the other place.

I call on the university authorities to start doing the appropriate thing, which is not to turn away and say that they can handle this. They must be clear and open and say, "Here are our systems." On the university boycott, they should say unequivocally, "There is none and there will be none." Every university should say that. They should outline what they are going to do about incidents on campuses and colleges, and say clearly to every student, "No racism of any kind in any educational establishment will be tolerated." That means that anti-Semitism will be tolerated no more and no less than any other form of racism. That message is not coming out strongly enough.

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am following the hon. Gentleman's points very carefully. Has he had the briefing that I received from Universities UK, which referred to the universities' disappointment at the fact that the all-party group's inquiry had not reported their evidence? They seem to be very keen to catch up, even if they were a little behind at the beginning. Will he comment on that?

John Mann: I was rather surprised by that briefing. I shall be moderate with my words and simply say that we are seeking a meeting with the universities and have been for some time. That meeting has not taken place. The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) has offered to participate in such meetings. I have had clear messages from the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley (Barbara Keeley) saying that they are happy to

participate. I am sure that others, as well, will want to participate. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) would love to participate. However, we have not had the opportunity. We are free and we will be free to meet, but we need the universities to come to the table. Perhaps they should spend less time writing to us and more time meeting us.

Mr. Boswell: I appeared yesterday on the Universities UK platform on a different subject. I had some private words about this matter. We should perhaps work on the basis that there is an understanding of responsibility on that side, and we need to work together to clinch it and to have a constructive discussion. It is unfortunate that we have not done so. In fairness to the universities, they have made some efforts, both individually and collectively. We now need to bring our collective wisdom to bear on what I think everyone accepts is a problem.

John Mann: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. It is clear that parliamentarians are keen to meet the universities to discuss this issue; I am sure that they will respond accordingly. Such meetings would help take matters forward in a very positive way, which would be good for the universities and for their reputations. We will reassure all parliamentarians on this issue.

I shall conclude with a number of questions for the Minister, so that he can contemplate some of the issues and detail. I am keen to know which Minister will be taking responsibility for the management of the programme of activity outlined in the Government's response. Can we be assured today that sufficient energy will be exerted and time devoted to maintain the progress made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas), who, in his former role, put enthusiasm and energy into formulating the Government's response on behalf of the Prime Minister and the Government?

I am also keen to know how many times the Government-appointed taskforce will meet. Will its progress be reported, and if so, in what way? That would help us to see precisely how the cross-departmental implementation of what the Government say they are doing in their response is going, so that we can assist that progress and help the Government to meet their objectives. What form will the progress report take, and can we be certain that there will be real and substantive measures to improve the situation on the ground? The Government's response has been robust, and I commend it, but it is essential that there be implementation on the ground. We must see real progress, including implementation throughout the country. I am sure that other hon. Members will raise these points in detail.

What are the Government's priority areas in their response? It would be helpful to have some clarification on that. Does the Minister share the concern that I sense among Members here about the situation on campuses, and does he echo the sentiments expressed in the debate in the other place last month? Will he ensure that ministerial meetings take place with university leaders in the near future, so that they are aware of the Government's concerns about anti-Semitism on campuses and the so-called boycott issue?

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ruth Kelly) were present at the launch of the Government response—of which the Government made great play—along with many colleagues from both sides of the House. My hon. Friend, as the then Minister with responsibility for such matters, said that he was keen that it should be a model to be shared with other Parliaments, and specified £20,000 of Government money to assist that progress. Is that commitment still there, and do the Government still believe that the model could be used by other Parliaments?

I could say much more, but I shall sit down and allow others to participate in the debate.

2.52 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) (Con): I thank my colleague who is, in this context, my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for his contribution. I also thank the colleague whom I call for this purpose my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) for leading our inquiry. There are times in this place—we all understand them—when confrontation, rude noises and lively debate are entirely appropriate. We should have the lively debate about this subject, but confrontation is not appropriate. We were surprised by the coincidence of view that we established during the four-part inquiry, which enabled us to produce an agreed report.

In terms of teeth, my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw has set the Government some challenges, which I echo rather than repeat. It is important, as I shall signal at the end of my remarks, that we do not just have this process, walk away from it and let nothing very much happen. I want to make a number of comments about different aspects of the report, rather than speaking abut the whole thing and I hope that we shall build up a picture of some of the problems that we identified.

In the history of racially driven, religiously driven and other sorts of hate crime, anti-Semitism must be the oldest. We cannot absoive ourselves of our record in English mediaeval history, and during the 20th century there were emanations of the most unimaginably appalling hate crime in western Europe. We owe it to the history of anti-Semitism to explore it, to be alert, and to look at the matter seriously. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw outlined our thought process when examining it, and I want to stress that at all times we came to the subject as what might be described in diplomatic language as non-aligned persons. I do not have an exclusive brief from either side of the Israel-Palestine issue. I do not have Jewish ancestry, or a significant Jewish population in my constituency. The issue is not a political one for me, but it is an issue for the country and for Parliament, and I echo what my hon. Friend said.

We can set an example by calling the nation's attention to the matter, and polishing our own act when that is appropriate. For example, as political parties, we must get on with the job of ensuring that our candidate selection is not biased in that respect, and that there is no preference in working people's clubs and so on that discriminates against Jewish or other people. We should be able to speak out about local incidents of anti-Semitism, and I hope to give exemplary voice to international incidents. The words that come to mind are: sunlight is the best disinfectant. The source is not precisely tied down, but I think those words came from an American Chief Justice, and they informed our process. Let us find out what the problem is, publish it and do something about it.

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

The Committee was balanced in its conclusion on the nature of anti-Semitism. I would be the last to minimise the danger of the traditional far right, because it is still there, and it is extremely unacceptable. It is as difficult for a Conservative party as it is for a centre left party, and we have no time for it. There has been a change on the political left, and I shall draw a distinction between that and another element. I sense from outside—other hon. Members may want to comment on this—a move away from political support for Israel as the imaginative and innovative democratic state of the early years of its inception towards a closer identification with the Palestinian cause or otherwise, or a distaste for the current Israeli Government, but I leave that as a matter of speculation. I do not think I can remember during my political career quite such organised distaste on the left that, however hard it is covered up—sometimes it may be genuinely motivated for political rather than racist reasons—comes out as anti-Semitism all too often. There has been press comment to that effect recently.

The third element—I do not know whether it is the middle way, but it is certainly not acceptable—is that of Islamic radicalism, which reflects the boiling hatreds in the middle east. We saw that when we tracked overt incidents of anti-Semitism with reference to the state of the political climate, the inception of intifada and so on, which has undoubtedly contributed to the problem. On the other hand, I would not want to signal to anyone that it has anything to do with the political argument in the middle east, because I do not believe that it has. Many Jewish people and I, as a non-Jewish person, have reservations about the conduct of some aspects of the Israeli Government, and clearly I share that with much of the population in that democratic country. We are not debating the middle east this afternoon, but we must acknowledge that it plays into a situation with underlying tensions, all of which are unacceptable, and must be faced and put down.

A point that we did not bring out in the report, but which underlies some of the concerns, is that the Jewish community was traditionally the most significant and distinct religious and ethnic minority in the United Kingdom, but with large-scale immigration from the new Commonwealth since the second world war that has changed, and the Islamic population is perhaps six times that of the Jewish population. That situation is likely to give rise to tensions in certain localities, but more typically to tensions in a detached environment such as a university—particularly a university that recruits locally from the underlying population and has a high concentration of Islamic students. That situation adds to the threat.

On the actual state of play, it is fair to refer briefly to paragraph 5 of our report, which mentions the Chief Rabbi's immensely impressive oral evidence. He said:

> "If you were to ask me is Britain an antisemitic society, the answer is manifestly and obviously no. It is one of the least antisemitic societies in the world".

That is an entirely fair comment, but the paragraph then reports the oral evidence of the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, with whom I also concur. He said:

> "There is probably a greater feeling of discomfort, greater concerns, greater fears now about antisemitism than there have been for many decades."

The issue is not about people being immediately subjected to violence or persecution, but about the feeling of discomfort—a very good word—that is not acceptable in a free democracy. None of our citizens should be put in that invidious position, and if nothing else, we must take action on that issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw implied that it is difficult to legislate against a negative. It is difficult, because people do not normally go around with a banner saying, "I am anti-Semitic and I am going to murder you." Sometimes they do, but they do not normally advertise it like that; there is usually—not always—either a kind of hole-in-the-corner, smutty scurrilousness, or it is not advertised. However, just because it is not in our face every minute does not mean that we should not do anything about it.

We must consider the components of the issue. Incidents do take place: I have mentioned that incidents have arisen because of the intifada, and the Community Security Trust does invaluable work by logging such incidents and providing advice. There is a serious passage in the report about the need for better awareness and a reporting structure and protocol from the Association of Chief Police Officers. The Government must be pressed to get on with that work so that we can implement any measure at any time.

The report is fair and balanced, because it says that we must also take account of diffuse anti-Semitism. We should not only record incidents such as a gravestone being overturned or some other horrible act; we should take account of what goes on behind people's hands, and what contributes to the feeling of discomfort that I have mentioned. That is why the most important parts of the report are forward-looking and about good practice in our society, which we must foster. The Government have rightly been set a limited number of challenges, but we understand that this is a job not just for them. It would be wrong to interpret our report as saying, "Over to you, get on with it." It is a wake-up call to the nation and to all the different parts of our diverse society, so that we might deal with a diverse problem. We do not ask for a one-off Government response, but for everyone to consider what they can do to meet those responsibilities.

I shall emphasise two or three points. I would say this, as a former Education Minister, but much of the issue starts at school. The Government have welcomed the report's suggestion about twinning schools. One might consider the Northern Ireland sectarian context. It is important to ensure that while schools may have strong faith backgrounds, they do not turn their backs on each other, but actively seek to know and speak about each other. By sheer coincidence, I was having lunch with a high commissioner from Malaysia today, and we were talking about the ethnic and religious complexities of his country and the interesting way in which they wish to restructure their schools. They wish to retain faith schools, as we would call them, but to place them into clusters so that there is social and educational interaction. We must all consider how we can make the situation more effective.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I support what the hon. Gentleman says. In relation to education about such matters in school, does he agree that anti-Semitism should be dealt with separately from

overall anti-racism? Does he acknowledge the phenomenon whereby anti-racists can themselves be anti-Semitic, as was evidenced by the conference in Durban?

Mr. Boswell: That is a useful and valuable comment. There is a big danger that in personal and social development, we lump a whole series of issues together. Even in education, whatever the motive, such development can either come out as a mish-mash or, if it is used selectively, exclude some elements of unacceptable conduct, such as anti-Semitism. To simply say, "We have done this, we have provided three hours a week," is not a sufficient answer to the problem.

I was a Minister with responsibility for the university sector, and thank God Ministers do not tell universities what to do. I hope they never will, but they can set an example and enter into dialogue. From the group's early exchanges, we can usefully do so, too. We have perhaps been fencing around the issue, so we must get together and talk.

I shall emphasise two elements. The first, easy element is the question of the academic boycott, for which there is no place in a university sector. It is unacceptable, and if there is any doubt, academics individually and the universities collectively must be told that it is unacceptable. The second, more difficult element is the attitude towards Jewish students, the way in which they are treated on campus, whether they are subjected to difficulties and whether their complaints are taken seriously. Action has been taken by individual universities and collectively by Universities UK, but I rest my case with Trevor Phillips's comment in oral evidence to the group, when he said that the picture was "patchy". We must ensure that it is universal, and send out the signal that such conduct is not acceptable. There must also be good reporting in universities, and if there is a problem, vice-chancellors must take the lead. However, society, Universities UK, the Government and ourselves must follow.

There is also the wider civil society question, which is an extension of what has been said about school twinning. While Jewish societies have their own charitable remits, it is important that they do not turn their back on the wider community. On the whole, they do not seek to do so. Equally, however, people must meet them half way, and there will be practical opportunities. We heard of one when we visited France on one of our studies. A bus had been damaged, and the Islamic school agreed to share with the Jewish school, which was commendable. We must look for active opportunities to collaborate, and perhaps consider things that we can do together in developing countries or in local community development, so that it becomes more common, accepted and the norm for the different building blocks of our society to fit together more comfortably. It happens below the radar much more than we concede. If there is diffuse anti-Semitism, there is also diffuse good practice, but we must bring it out, celebrate it and extend it.

The wider world is relevant, if only because I noticed yesterday a news source, of which I was not aware, from Jerusalem, which was quoted in our press. It expressed concern about a systemic growth in anti-Semitism throughout Europe. I felt very sympathetic to those comments. At the time of the report, we were conscious of the danger that if we set out to expose our own dirty linen, Europe would be pilloried for being exceptionally dreadful.

Having gone to the European Parliament with my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, I can report that I had an interesting conversation with a lady parliamentarian from one of the Baltic states. She appeared perfectly sane and normal, but when I asked her about the extent of anti-Semitism in her area, she said, "We don't have a problem." I would say, with respect, that she was either being naive or disingenuous, and I do not know which I find less acceptable. I have also had one or two brisk dialogues with Polish parliamentarians, in which I have said that their party leader is an anti-Semite, and I have been assured that that is not the case. It is, however, still worth at least raising the issue, and I will continue to do so. Indeed, many of us on the all-party group are at the disposal, as it were, of any European Parliament that wants to take another look at this issue, and we want to share some of our experience.

As I said, we have had an opportunity to say something about the report in the European Parliament. However, I also happen to be a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as does my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham, and we participated—with me perhaps as the junior partner—in a fairly brisk double act when we responded to a report to the Council on combating anti-Semitism in Europe. I mention that partly because the rapporteur in this case is currently the chairman of the European democratic group—in which the British Conservative party is a participant—and interestingly, although I leave this only for speculation, also a member of United Russia, so he is a Putin supporter. What is also interesting, however, given that country's history of anti-Semitism, which is not a happy subject, and the fact that its human rights record is not always above criticism or reproach, is that this person's report should say explicitly that there were concerns about France, the Russian Federation and indeed the United Kingdom, which takes us back to my slight concern about our exposing our own problems.

However, there was an element of self-criticism in the report, which I find encouraging. Indeed, the report was quite trenchant, and I hope that it was a wake-up call to some of the countries that say they have no problem. We shall persist in tackling the issue and we shall not let it go. We need to make it clear—indeed, the Foreign Office needs to make it clear in private soundings—that the behaviour that I have described is wrong and that we would be concerned as a country if domestic politics were conducted according to such an agenda.

We were pleased with our report, but we were also very pleased with the Government's response, and I say that from the Opposition Benches; indeed, I do not think that there was a partisan issue. What matters, however, is what happens now. If we just sit there saying, "Oh well, it's worth looking at the issue. Wasn't that interesting? It may have been a little concerning," but then do nothing, we will have short-changed the problem. We have a problem, which we have exposed, and it is all the more soluble because we have exposed it rather than pushing it under the carpet. However, we now need to get on with the business of producing—all of us together, not just the Government—an appropriate response.

[Mr. Boswell]

In conclusion, let me say that this is the start of a process of vigilance and cleansing, but it is not the end of the process and it is not a process that we can ever afford to let up on.

3.13 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I am grateful to those who have spoken so far and particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for his energetic and politically far-sighted and clear chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism. I am also grateful to the Government for responding to our report with a Command Paper, which is a rare honour for a parliamentary group that does not have the status of a Select Committee. Finally, I am grateful to the Prime Minister for his support—indeed, we went to see him to present our report—as well as to the various Ministers concerned, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Minister is here to respond on behalf of the Department.

In essence, today's debate is not about bringing closure, but about announcing a new chapter in Parliament's commitment to rooting out anti-Semitism. We have been lucky in that a remarkable series of publications and statements from within different communities has touched on this issue since our report came out. In particular, I want to refer to a book called "The Islamist", which is published by Penguin and which I am happy to give an absolute plug in *Hansard*. It is written by Mohammed Husain—known as Ed Husain—who is a young Muslim from east London. He went through school, college and university as an Islamist and went to study and live in Syria and Saudi Arabia. Frankly, his book should be read by everybody in Britain and certainly by all of us in this chamber, by every vice-chancellor and by everybody in the University and College Union, which organised the anti-Jewish boycott.

In a sense, the book is what we have all been waiting for: it is neither a debate between different groups with different positions nor a close textual reading of statements—some highly odious—calling for the death of Salman Rushdie 16 or 17 years ago or of statements by visiting theologians, whose remarks on Jews would have done Goebbels or Himmler little justice. Instead, we now have a book that bears witness to the extent to which the hatred of Jews—anti-Semitism—the hatred of Israel and contempt for anything to do with Jewishness are part and parcel of the ideological formation, alas, of young people in this country who decide to go down the road of radical Islamist ideology.

Some right hon. and hon. Members in the House, and indeed in the Government, may have been attracted by different creeds and beliefs in their student days, but they put such things behind them as the years passed. The problem that we face today, however, particularly on campuses, is a continuation of the ideological formation described in the book. More Ed Husains are coming, but very few will have the literary gifts, the energy or the desire to confront their own demons or their old friends and comrades, or to say things about their families and religion that might not be too comfortable.

I strongly recommend Ed Husain's book. In it, he describes being in his college and working under the religious banner of the Islamic Society. He describes invoking Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and having his injunctions on the walls. Those injunctions include:

> "The Koran is Our Constitution. Jihad is Our Way. Martyrdom is Our Desire."

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): Like the right hon. Gentleman, I have just read the book. Did he note that Mr. Husain claims at one point that he was taken to what he described as sessions of

> "Koran recitation, religious discussion, antisemitism and good food"

by a person who still holds quite senior rank within the Muslim Council of Britain?

Mr. MacShane: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me for a second, I will indeed come on to my good friend Mr. Bunglawala.

The point is important. I go to mosques in my constituency, and the councils of elders and the imams are good, pious men—their religion is one of hope, peace, love and charity. Yes, the young boys learn the Koran, just as I learned the Latin mass, and I can take hon. Members through it if they would like me to—Introibo ad altare Dei. Perhaps I will stop my Latin at that point, although I understand that the Pope may be bringing the Latin mass back. All religions teach their young boys and girls to recite, and to learn by heart and by rote. There is absolutely nothing wrong in that. But that exact point is made by the fact that when I learned my Latin mass I did not then mix it with hatred of another religion or group of people. By all means let people teach and discuss the Koran and learn as much as possible about the life of the Prophet; but let them not go down the road of anti-Semitism.

Mrs. Ellman: My right hon. Friend performs an important function in drawing attention to the extent of Islamic anti-Semitism, which is often not recognised, but does he also agree that strong anti-Semitism is to be found in groups such as the British National party and Combat 18?

Mr. MacShane: Very much so. The only full length work written by the odious Nick Griffin, called "Who are the Mindbenders?" is a long litany of hate against people in the British media whom he says are Jews. He goes through people's names, saying that they were originally called something else. All the traditional, odious hundred-year-old rhetoric against the Jew is there at the heart of the BNP. There is an objective alliance between the extreme Islamist organisations, such as the Muslim Association of Britain, and the extreme right-wing organisations. In a sense they join as the circle of anti-Jewish extremism closes itself.

Mr. Husain, in his college, put up a poster that said, "Islam: The Final Solution." There were protests, as one might expect. He writes about his fellow students that

> "deep down, we never really objected to the Holocaust. Inder,[4] in the prayer room we were convinced that the college principal as well as several other members of the management, were Zionist agents. Without question we despised Jews".

He writes also:

"We suspected that the college management was dominated not only by Jews, but by homosexuals too....there was a gay-Jewish conspiracy to undermine our efforts."

I read these extracts because perhaps people do not understand how mutilated is the thinking of those ideologues. It is not narrowly a matter of the behaviour of Israel in the occupied territories; it is a much stronger, deep-going hatred of the Jews and of gays, and deep contempt for the rights of women fully to be women and control their own lives rather than being dictated to by men.

In the book Ed Husain meets Inayat Bunglawala, who is now one of the spokesmen or leaders of the Muslim Council of Britain, and who is regularly on "Today" and "Newsnight". I hesitate to add to the many woes of the director-general of the BBC, Mr. Mark Thompson, at the moment, but he might want to ask why someone with that track record of anti-Semitism is allowed such an unchallenged free rein on the main BBC programmes.

John Mann *rose—*

Mrs. Ellman *rose—*

Mr. MacShane: I shall give way to my left, and to a lady.

Mrs. Ellman: I note my right hon. Friend's comments about Mr. Bunglawala. Does he have the same sentiments about Dr. Azam Tamimi, formerly of the Muslim Association of Britain, who is also a frequent commentator on our national media? Dr. Tamimi is on record as saying in a BBC interview that he would be a suicide bomber if he could.

Mr. MacShane: Yes, of course, and I shall come to that aspect of the argument later.

There is—I speak as a former president of the National Union of Journalists—a deeply ingrained belief in all of us about the importance of freedom of expression, but freedom of expression that supports the killing of innocent people anywhere in the world is a freedom on which there are some limits. In the United States there are very powerful laws upholding freedom of expression, but as the great Justice Frankfurter said, they do not extend to shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theatre. In other words, even in America, there must be some self-limitation.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. MacShane: I wonder whether I might make a little more progress, because I am conscious that other hon. Members want to speak, and if I keep giving way I may take up more time than I should.

To return to my account, Mr. Husain met Mr. Inayat Bunglawala, and off they went for their meetings—young men in their 20s, a decade ago:

"Inayat would pick me up and drop me off after a session of Koran recitation, religious discussion and anti-Semitism".

He adds:

"Jew-bashing was an acceptable part of the Islamist curriculum."

Mr. Husain's final and important comment is:

"What dumbfounded us was the fact that the authorities on the campus never stopped us."

That is in a sense the most killing statement in the book. Of course, a huge part of the report was devoted to saying that it is time to attend to the matter of British universities and colleges—I think that the real problems start there, as adolescents of 15, 16 or 17 are perhaps not really ready to imbibe an evil anti-Jewish, Israel-hating and Jew-bashing ideology, but at college and university that can happen.

We invited the university campuses to take action against the phenomenon. However, the opposite has happened. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw has mentioned that the vice-chancellors do not seem willing fully to engage with the question. The union representing university and college lecturers has taken frankly the most extraordinary decision in the history of the British trade union movement. For the first time in British history since the abolition of the anti-Jewish discrimination laws in the 19th century, a college union is saying that there should be discrimination against Jews. There is no call for a boycott against people from universities in other countries where state practices are infinitely more odious than those undertaken by some agents of the Government of Israel. There is no call for a boycott of Arab professors or students in Israeli universities. The call is directed expressly at Jews. I find it unbelievable that there was not a greater upsurge of outrage in our country about that call.

My hon. Friend has rightly said that Sally Hunt, the union general secretary, has come out clearly against that call, that it will not come into effect and that most university lecturers are ashamed at their new union's decision, but none the less it still stands. I spend some time as a Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe discussing, in the course of political work in many different European cities, what the British Government are doing. Again and again this summer I have had the question put to me, "What on earth is going on? This is the first time any European trade union has sought to organise any kind of boycott against Jews." It is no use saying, "No, it is because they work in Israel and are associated with Israeli universities." It is because they are Jews that people are to be picked out. That is why it is so important that my hon. Friend the Minister should ask the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills what its action will be in the coming period in response to that grave problem.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills must take a lead. It is not right that the Department for Communities and Local Government should be the sole Department involved in the matter. My right hon. Friend must take a clear lead. I invite the Minister to write to me when he returns to his Department, outlining the views of his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and what action he will take before the academic term starts in the autumn. We do not need to see another outbreak of anti-Semitism on campus, followed by action; we need pre-emptive, preventive action now.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education has made clear in the media and on a visit to Israel the Government's repugnance at the call for a boycott by the universities union, but now that the Department for Education and Skills has been broken up, it behoves the Secretary of State responsible to take a clear lead. We must go further. We need an action programme signed by each vice-chancellor explaining what they will do to ensure that academic freedom is not threatened by calls from any country for boycotts against Jews.

[Mr. MacShane]

I invite the Minister—I do not know how cash-strapped his budget is, but it always surprises those of us with any connection to Government how poor and lacking in resources any Department is until it decides to do something—to send Ed Husain's book to every vice-chancellor and ask them all to read it over the summer holidays, so that never again can anybody say, "What dumbfounded us was the fact that the authorities on campus never stopped our anti-Jewish hate campaigns."

We must understand the extent of the dismay, particularly throughout Europe—that is the part of the world in which I have the most contacts and do some work—at such decisions. Our universities should understand the extent to which European parliamentarians—the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne), a distinguished former Member of the European Parliament, might want to comment—members of the Council of Europe from the Parliaments of the 46 member states and the European Commission are concerned about the boycott calls and the reports of anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel on British university campuses. UK universities receive a great deal of funding and support from the European Commission and other European institutions. If vice-chancellors are not seen to take clear action against anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish behaviour on campus, the question will arise whether that funding will be quite as automatic as it has been.

This is not simply about odious acts of violent hate; it is about a culture of sneering and contempt. Too many of our Jewish students, as we found on our travels to talk to university and sixth-form students, feel afraid. That is a terrible thing. Islamophobia exists, as do snarls and snide comments at times about people of many different faiths, including Irish Catholics—I could tell stories from my mother's side—but we found something quite different. Some young British men and women simply are not 100 per cent. happy going to university, as my children will be. That is quite wrong.

I turn to the problem of foreign policy. The Minister must feel that he is carrying the burden for rather more Departments than he should, but the question of what Britain says and does about international anti-Semitism must be integrated into the work of our international policy Departments. To begin with, we must consider the role of the internet as the publisher of the most odious anti-Semitic material, as well as material written to inflame global Islamist opinion against Israel and the defence of democracy anywhere in the world. It is not too much to describe the net as a contemporary version of *Der Stürmer*, the notorious anti-Jewish Nazi newspaper published in the Hitler years. One can easily read Islamist propaganda anywhere just by logging on.

We must discuss the issue with the United States in particular, because America is the biggest source of internet service providers and America, alas, allows unacceptable amounts of pornography, the commercialisation of sexual relations and other vile material, including anti-Semitic propaganda, on the net. In the cause of freedom of expression, American friends and colleagues in politics and public life are reluctant to talk about dealing expressly with such things. Obviously criminal sites can easily be shut down, but the problem goes well beyond that. We must have a discussion about the deontology of the net and what action can be taken to prevent it from being accessed in order to poison minds with propaganda against Jews.

I am not talking about the religion of Islam. I have no problem with any preacher talking about his faith. It is not necessarily my cup of tea—I do not believe that any type of religious fundamentalism is a great help in these troubled times—but I respect and admire enormously the commitment to faith of my 10,000 Muslim constituents, who are the Muslims I know best. It is the ideology of Islamism—not the faith but the ism—that must be confronted.

We have seen preposterous examples of what can be easily accessed on the net. Islamist organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain condemned the suicide bombings in the tube two years ago, the failed car bombings a few weeks ago and the attacks on the twin towers, but that was the easy part. The real test is to condemn suicide bombings in the middle east, Iraq, Kashmir or Afghanistan. A dead man in a London tube or a Manhattan office tower is an innocent victim of evil terrorism, but to read much of the material written by Islamist ideologues, a dead Jewish child or granny in a Tel Aviv bus is a legitimate target for what almost appears to be good or acceptable terrorism. Dressing the matter up with talk of resistance or freedom fighting is sheer hypocrisy, as is making comparisons with Nelson Mandela when South African apartheid was overthrown by peaceful means, or Mahatma Gandhi when the one thing that he taught the world in freeing his country from British rule was to shun violence rather than embrace it.

Until the Muslim Council of Britain condemns all terrorist violence at all times and places, I shall take its condemnation of terrorism in our country as an expression of piety rather than a willingness to join the great mass of UK citizens, including all the Muslims I know, who detest terrorists and their ideological gurus who make hatred of Jews and Israel a key element of Islamism. We must continually spell that out to our international partners and friends. We are doing so through the Council of Europe, but we must also take the message to those countries that would find what I just said completely unacceptable or nonsense. One can walk through too many streets in Istanbul and buy "Mein Kampf"; television channels in Egypt and Jordan broadcast films based on blood libels or "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion". Such countries are part of the problem and not yet part of the solution. The British Council should do more—in addition to interfaith dialogue, in which I am a complete believer—to encourage theological discussion between Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians, all children of the great Abrahamic religions. Indeed, we need to invite theologians—theologians in the purest sense—to discuss whether any part of their religions can endorse evil action; that includes the Christian religions.

The fundamental point that the Foreign Office must start to consider is what it is doing through formal diplomatic means, démarche, and its sponsorship of the British Council, the BBC World Service and BBC World TV, to make clear our concerns about anti-Semitism. Let nobody misunderstand the points to be drawn from our report and the points made by the Government in their strong response. What we are discussing is part of a new global ideology, which is a nihilist renunciation of

everything that people have fought for, since Galileo through to Spinoza and the years of the enlightenment, the great advances in freedom of expression and religious freedom in the 19th century and today's human values as expressed in the European convention on human rights and the United Nations charter, to which we all sign up.

That ideology is a denial of what is best and most important for all human beings. That is why I hope that our modest report, which has produced a fine response from the Government, is not seen as a closing down of the discussion in the House of Commons. It should be seen as the beginning of a wider fightback until anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel is extirpated once and for all and seen as part and parcel of the thinking of only a tiny fringe—the extreme, idiot minority, whom we can never get rid of, but who should no longer be allowed air time on the BBC. They should not be treated as serious interlocutors for the great faith of Islam and the vast majority of British Muslims, who repudiate the evil ideology that is expressed, in a perverted way, in the name of their faith.

3.42 pm

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I add my penn'orth to those of other Members who have appreciated the Government's efforts to respond to the all-party parliamentary inquiry's report. I was honoured to be the Liberal Democrat member of the inquiry, and I pay tribute to the dedication of our research staff and to our chairman, the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), for guiding us through a good route march of research and thinking.

This debate is crucial, not just to the Jewish community in this country but to all minority communities. In some basic sense, we are all minorities in one way or another: in our tastes, beliefs, enthusiasms and views. We must defend that diversity. We have to champion and celebrate it, or we will lose it—at our peril. Today, the Jewish community faces the challenges that we are discussing, but the Muslim community may well face them tomorrow and some other community may face them the day after.

Having been involved in the inquiry and report, I was shocked that a minority community in modern Britain should suffer problems such as those suffered by the Jewish community. Thank heavens, there has been no direct attack on a Jewish community building since the bombing in 1994 of Balfour house, the headquarters of the Joint Israel Appeal and other UK Jewish charities. However, that cast a long shadow over many activities of the community. I shall give one example, which I found striking and is in the report. It relates to the King David school, which has 1,000 Jewish pupils. Under the advice of the local police and the Community Security Trust, it now has CCTV, anti-shatter glass and reinforced walls. There are just two access points to the school, and they are controlled by security guards. It all comes at a cost of £130,000 annually—with, I have to say, very little, if any, support from the British state as yet. A similar school in France suffering similar problems gets a major contribution towards costs.

At one end of the spectrum are issues of potential criminal damage, threats to the person, bomb and firebomb attacks—although as I said, those latter have not happened recently in the UK. We have heard from other hon. Members that the softer problems can be just as intrusive and limiting. The development of anti-Semitic discourse in Britain is worrying; we found it worrying as we took our evidence. Given the frequent lazy confusion of Jewish with Israeli, and Israeli with the Israeli Government, it is easy to slip into something that to any Jewish person can seem—indeed, is—a discriminatory set of remarks.

It is worth mentioning the definition of anti-Semitism in the report which we adopted from the EU monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia. The definition is not perfect; I am sure that the debate will go on. However, it is a good working definition of what we have to deal with. It simply states:

> "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

We have to be aware of that and deal with it; the right hon. Member for Rotherham rightly set that out in quoting from the Ed Husain book.

Underlying that definition of anti-Semitism is a fundamental and old battle against any type of human behaviour that seeks to stereotype us as other than individuals and to depict our behaviour as being in some sense determined by the group of which we are a part. Such behaviour does not treat our individual views and beliefs as worth while in themselves, but as part of a collective view or belief. For any liberal, that is deeply shocking. Criticism in that context, as that definition sets out, constitutes anti-Semitism—for example, when it applies double standards to Israel that are not applied elsewhere, when it requires a standard of behaviour from Israel not demanded elsewhere, or when it holds Jews collectively responsible for the behaviour of the state of Israel. Israel, after all, is a democratic state with a vigorous tradition of a free press—often an opposition press—and of free opposition parties. Moreover, as people often forget, it has a substantial Arab minority, which has full political rights and exercises them in its representation in the Knesset.

I recognise that the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) and the right hon. Member for Rotherham in particular have already mentioned this issue, but I should like to extend some of the points about the academic boycott, which I feel is total folly. Its adherents and proponents have set it out in terms that are counter-productive as well as illiberal. I also share the dismay about the motion passed at the annual conference of the University and College Union. Although I can hear the weasel words transmitted to us by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), the thrust of that motion—its political understanding—was that it was to be seen as a support for a boycott of Israeli universities. The academic boycott essentially treats the individual, once again, as someone who is responsible for the behaviour of their group—not as an individual, but as part of a collectivity for which they cannot conceivably share responsibility. Two wrongs cannot and do not make a right.

The boycott would be counter-productive, even in the terms of those who are pressing for it, since many of those who are most critical of Israeli Government policies are to be found in the universities, think-tanks and institutes within Israel. Jonathan Freedland was absolutely right when he wrote recently in the *Evening Standard*:

[Chris Huhne]

"For one thing, Israeli academics are disproportionately represented in Israel's 'peace camp.' The UCU will be boycotting the very people who have done most to draw the Israeli public's attention to the folly of the occupation, to the very people working to bring an end to this desperate conflict. By their actions, the UCU will embolden the Israeli right who will be able to say, 'Look, the world hates and isolates us: this is exactly why we have to be militarily strong.'"

From the other side of the community divide, so to speak, Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, the president of al-Quds university—the only Arab university in Jerusalem—has said:

"An international academic boycott of Israel, on pro-Palestinian grounds, is self-defeating: it would only succeed in weakening the strategically important bridge through which the state of war between Israelis and Palestinians could be ended and Palestinian rights could therefore be restored. Instead of burning that bridge, the international academy should do everything within its power to strengthen it including, foremost, through its own collaborative intervention."

I welcome the idea from the right hon. Member for Rotherham that the new Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills should attempt to communicate the concern—in the hope that he shares it—to the vice-chancellors about the recent developments of this nature in those communities. It is important for us to remember the words of George Bernard Shaw, who once said that the English think that they are being tolerant when often they are merely being indifferent. We must not be indifferent; we have to be tolerant, and toleration sometimes requires a more active role than mere indifference. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us on the action that the Government are taking to ensure that any academic boycott will not be implemented, and on whether university authorities might consider legal sanctions or derecognition against a UCU branch that supported a boycott. Could, for example, the Department for Communities and Local Government encourage UCU to conduct a race equality impact assessment over any boycott policy?

I said at the beginning that this is not an issue only for the Jewish community. There is an important line to be drawn and defended for all of us who care about the rights of our fellow citizens. Perhaps the best quotation that I could mention in this context, well-known though it is, is that from Pastor Martin Niemöller, referring to the sad developments in Germany in the 1930s. He said:

"First, they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist;

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me".

We let others encroach on the freedom of our fellow citizens to make their lives as they choose at our great peril. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all. With the attacks on the Jewish community, the time has come to draw a firm line on behalf of us all.

3.54 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley) (Lab): A wide range of material is covered in the inquiry and has been covered in the debate. As a member of the inquiry panel, I wanted to touch again on some of the experiences reported to us by adults and young people at the hearing in Manchester that was part of the inquiry, and to relate them to the Government's responses and some of the report's recommendations.

Let me touch briefly on the context. I am bearing it in mind that the Minister responding to the debate was not involved in those earlier stages. Clearly, Greater Manchester was an important part of the inquiry because it has the second largest Jewish population in the UK, second only to London and numbering somewhere between 22,000 and 35,000. Salford, my local authority, has a quarter of that population, but most of it is not in my constituency. Like some other Members, I am reflecting not a constituency interest but a general area interest.

As the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) said, we visited Manchester and held hearings there, which occupied most of a day, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) and I visited the King David school. That was an important aspect of the inquiry, because that school educates about 1,000 Jewish children and young people. We have to regard those whom we encountered there as an important sample of the total population of Jewish children and young people in Greater Manchester, which, as I said, has the second largest such population in the UK.

As has been mentioned, we saw first hand at the school security measures that are now considered necessary, based on the advice of the police and the Community Security Trust. Reinforced fencing and CCTV could, in some urban areas of Manchester and Salford, be accepted and possibly even be standard. However, that is not the case for things such as anti-shatter glass and reinforced walls, controlled access to the school site, security guards and a necessary security rota of parents. How would parents at other schools feel if they were required to take part in a security rota to cover the school? Fire drills are, we hope, standard in schools, but not the bomb drills that they have at the King David school. As the hon. Member for Eastleigh said, those security measures cost £130,000 per annum, but because such support was not forthcoming from the then Department for Education and Skills, the parents are being asked to contribute that sum.

Looking back on the report, we should look to other countries, particularly France. If that school was in Paris, the French Government would contribute to the security that is judged necessary, so that those children could be educated.

John Mann: On reflection, does my hon. Friend agree with me that the panel and the group have perhaps been too moderate in some of their conclusions, specifically the recommendation that the Government should be contributing to the security for one of the highest performing state schools in the country?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed. As I looked back on what was reported to us in preparation for the debate, I was struck by the inordinate level of financial and physical involvement that those parents are required to have in the school's security, in order to protect their children. We said a number of times during the inquiry that certain things there would not be acceptable to any

other group in our communities. If they were Sikh or Catholic parents, they would complain to their MPs. However, we did encounter such a situation and I, like many other Members, was very surprised by it.

The majority, if not all, of the children and young people whom we spoke to had been threatened or abused because of their Jewish faith. The example was readily given to us of a car being driven directly at a female Jewish pupil at the school by a female adult. The boys reported that they were abused daily as they went to and from school on public transport. They had such things as "Jew!" and "Get out of our country" shouted at them.

In the recent past, there was a local campaign to prevent the King David primary school from relocating and building a new primary school in an open area. The British People's party produced a leaflet saying, "Defend our English park". There was a sense of "This is our country. It's our England. You are not part of it", which is a terrible thing to be faced with day in, day out. It was clear to me from talking to the students at King David school that that was directed at them and their families as part of their daily lives.

Let us imagine it. There were examples of students experiencing verbal abuse going to and from school, or when playing football with other schools. I guess that football is trying to face down the problem, but teams at other schools would ritually verbally abuse the students before they started playing. One girl, quite tellingly, explained what happened when she attended a drama group. Out-of-school activities are important to young people, but when it was discovered that she was Jewish, she was spat at and abused. She left the group because the teacher would not intervene on her behalf.

We got an overall view of the level of anti-Semitism. When we asked young people whether they felt that it had got worse, they said that they were noticing it more. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham touched on, the key thing is the extent to which it affected their choice of university. They got advice from older students already at university, and they were choosing where they wanted to go not on the basis of, for example, selecting a course, but at which university they would be safest.

Schools should not have to pay a lot of money for extra security. It would horrify us if other schools needed reinforced walls and anti-shatter glass. On the whole, schools should not have to employ security guards just to allow their pupils an education. As I said, most schools have fire drills, but this one has bomb drills. We will all realise that that must add to the sense of tension and fear felt by someone who has to go through that regularly. Schools and families should not have leaflet campaigns of hatred directed at them when they want to build a new primary school in a community. The school is long-established in the area, not new to the community.

There have been serious incidents in communities in Salford and Manchester, including stabbings and other extreme forms of violence. A young person being attacked with a baseball bat was one example. It is important that, beyond the school environment, families and adults are able to attend synagogue in their communities and express their religious faith without the fear of being attacked. In the afternoon session held with adults, councillors and the police, people reported that they had been attacked, spat at and verbally abused, and, again, had had cars driven at them when they were attending synagogue.

The level of anti-Semitism on campus is high, and in some places the situation seems to be worsening. I attended Salford university, which, happily, seems to have one of the better track records in the family of universities in Greater Manchester. We even heard that at Manchester medical school, people of the Jewish faith are not progressing in their careers as they might, which they do at Salford. The report and the evidence that we took showed a correlation between the situation in the middle east and the tensions there, the experiences of student bodies on campuses and school pupils, and the intimidation and harassment of Jewish students.

I keep coming back to the importance of people having to factor into their decisions their safety from attack or intimidation. This week, there was a statement to Parliament about the priorities of Ministers for Women. If any other group of people picked out a university or other educational institution to attend, based only on how safe they would feel, we would all be horrified. Yet the examples that we heard were unsurprising, given the history of my local universities. The university of Manchester students union proposed a motion in 2002 that anti-Zionism or criticism of Israel was not anti-Semitism, and called for a boycott of Israeli goods. We saw a leaflet that quoted neo-Nazi propaganda, reproducing historical anti-Semitic slander describing Jews as vampires and calling for them to be expelled.

On the activities of far-right parties, I have talked about the British People's party's campaign against the establishment of a new Jewish primary school in Heaton park, but we know that the British National party also campaigns in overtly anti-Semitic ways. Nick Griffin calls the holocaust a hoax and a "profitable lie"—an anti-Semitic act in itself. In local elections this year, the BNP campaigned more widely. It always stood one candidate in Salford, in the university ward, but, as in other parts of the country, its campaign has developed this year. It stood in six different wards across the three constituencies in Salford in May 2007. The hatred and anti-Semitic rhetoric of Nick Griffin is spreading through our communities and I, for one, as a Salford MP, find that disturbing, given that we have one quarter of the Jewish population of Greater Manchester's 10 areas.

I wish to touch briefly on the work of the Holocaust Education Trust, which is an important counter to the rhetoric and hatred of the BNP. Young people from sixth forms and colleges can visit Auschwitz on a one-day trip and take part in seminars reflecting the lessons of the holocaust for their generation. Given what I have said about what is happening in Salford, I hope that a school from my constituency will take part in that scheme later this year. I hope that we are all promoting it, now that the finances allow it to happen.

It seems worrying that, of 600 anti-Semitic incidents recorded in the UK in 2006, a quarter took place in Greater Manchester. On the face of it, it is worrying for Greater Manchester to have a quarter of the incidents but only 10 per cent. of the Jewish population. Within those figures, almost half the incidents of assault or extreme violence in the UK took place there. I have detailed the experience of students at King David school and some unacceptable incidents in our community.

[Barbara Keeley]

However, I wish to record my own feelings after our day of inquiry in Greater Manchester and after the writing of the report. We can draw a different conclusion: it should be understood that Greater Manchester police is probably exemplary in how it records and monitors anti-Semitic incidents and co-operates with the Community Security Trust. As was mentioned in the Chamber today, sometimes an increase in the number of incidents is a sign not that things are getting worse, but that such incidents are being reported. That is the first step to things getting better. I would not want, through detailing what we found in Manchester, Salford and elsewhere in Greater Manchester, to leave the impression that things are terrible there. The work of the police there is very good.

There were further important examples of good practice in Manchester. The former Lord Mayor, Councillor Mohammed Afzal Khan, a Muslim, took a lead in his mayoral year on promoting inter-faith dialogue, and was joint chair of the Manchester Muslim-Jewish Forum.

Having said what I have, I add that there is much to welcome in the Government's response to our all-party parliamentary inquiry. I wish to mention some particular things relating to Manchester hearings. The Government's response condemns the rise in the number of such incidents and states that people should be able to live their lives free from verbal or physical attack, which they clearly are not doing. It rightly points out that anti-Semitism is starting to be accepted instead of condemned, which is an important point.

On anti-Semitism on campuses, about which a number of Members have spoken, there is an important recognition that Jewish students feel threatened and that, as we said in the report, the response of vice-chancellors is patchy. We really should start to insist that they take a more active role. I keep coming back to the fact that the young people to whom we talked cannot choose the university that they want to go to, the place where they want to live or the course they want to do; they have to consider their safety. That is unacceptable.

On the monitoring and recording of anti-Semitic incidents, if Greater Manchester police can do it, other areas can, too. The largest part of the Jewish population lives in London, and the statistics from London look ludicrous in comparison with those from Manchester. It can be done, and the recommendation that the Home Office research and report annually to Parliament is key. The other exemplary aspect in Manchester is the working together of the police and the Community Security Trust, which is vital. It was also important that the Crown Prosecution Service accepted that the low number of prosecutions of anti-Semitic incidents was not acceptable, and we should, as MPs, continue to review its plans in that regard.

The Government's response says that the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government have a cross-government group of officials working on the matter. It is important that DCLG continues to work on it—it did not commit to it—and that it commissions an annual survey on attitudes and tensions. We cannot keep investigating in detail, as we did for the Manchester hearings, but it is important that a Government Department continue to work on the matter. The new single equality body, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, has a key role to play in the months ahead. It is important that we feed information to it as it establishes itself and takes up that key role.

The step of promoting inter-faith programmes and leadership programmes for young Muslims and Jews was fully supported by the Government in their response. I mentioned the good example of the former mayor of Manchester. People in civic leadership positions such as the mayor of Manchester—who, in that case, was a Muslim—have an important role to play. The significance of their role could be promoted.

The Government's response details further events involving leaders of major faith communities and the work of the Faith Communities Consultative Council, which are important. In March, there was an event for rabbis and imams and another for Muslim and Jewish women. Such leadership events must continue to be promoted. I should also mention that ITV Granada has a programme to build links in the community between different faiths and cultures. As a media body, it has taken on that role. I did not know about that previously, but I commend its work.

Finally, given everything that I have said about schools, and that other Members have said about the reported difficulties at King David school, we should look again at the idea in our report on twinning schools and communities. It is clearly wrong that students from one school cannot play football with pupils from another school without experiencing verbal prejudice. The idea of twinning schools of different faiths should be strongly encouraged and promoted.

I have dealt mainly with school, campus and community. It is important that we work toward people understanding these issues when they are younger, and, most importantly, toward Jewish children and young people being able to receive their education at school and university free from physical or verbal attack. Although there are some important steps in the Government's response, it is clear that continued action and, perhaps, extra focus will be required in the future.

4.12 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the members of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism for performing a public service by bringing to public attention the growing and distressing phenomenon of anti-Semitism. It is certainly not anti-Semitic to criticise the state of Israel, but it is anti-Semitic to demonise Israel, the only Jewish state, in a way that no other state is demonised. As the report states, the effect of that is that

"traditional antisemitic notions of Jewish conspiratorial power, manipulation and subversion are then transferred from Jews (a religious or racial group) on to Zionism (a political movement)."

We see the effects in several ways. Reference has been made to statements by extremist Islamic movements, the British National party and Combat 18 that condemn Jews and Zionism together, but perhaps most disturbing is the way that anti-Semitic discourse, as the report describes it, has become part of mainstream society. The front page of the *New Statesman* on 4 January 2002 was truly shocking. That magazine is part of mainstream society, yet on its front page we saw the Jewish star of

David piercing the Union Jack, which is the British symbol, under the heading, "A kosher conspiracy?" When the then editor of the *New Statesman* finally apologised for it, he stated that he simply had not understood what the imagery, which was, in fact, Nazi imagery, actually meant.

What has happened has led to more attacks on Jewish people and, as hon. Members have said, to increasing Jewish concern. British Jews are active citizens who have pioneered several different models of successful integration that could well be followed by other minority communities, yet many Jewish people in this country feel increasingly uneasy and disturbed. That is partly because of the growing number of attacks on Jews, as shown by the reports of the Community Security Trust, but also because of what is detected as a change of attitude. It has become all too commonly acceptable to criticise Jews and imply that they are a subversive people—again, relating them to negative views about the Jewish state and Zionism.

The report has increased public awareness of what is happening. I commend the members and chairman of the all-party group and the commission itself for what has been achieved. Many members of the Jewish community are asking what is to be done. The question is not just for the Jewish community; it is about the nature of our society. I hope that the Government and others will respond to the shocking information in the report and that we will see actio

4.15 pm

Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a privilege to be able to speak in this debate on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. I believe that I am the first speaker in the debate who does not have either of the two qualifications that other speakers have had. I did not serve on the commission nor do I have a Jewish background. For that matter, neither do I have a significant Jewish community in my constituency. Perhaps I can look on the subject of the debate and the debate so far from slightly outside the perspective of some of those who have spoken.

The all-party group's inquiry is a moving piece of work. It is thorough and measured, and, for me, it was revelatory in many ways. I hope that it serves to be revelatory in so far as policy making goes, but not just Government policy making. Several speakers made it clear that overcoming the problem that the inquiry brought out will require changes in other parts of civic society.

This is a unique occasion. I understand that it is the first time that an all-party group's report has been the subject of a debate and an official response from the Government. Indeed, I believe that it set you one or two procedural issues to deal with at the beginning of the debate, Sir John.

I welcome the Government's response, which is a good first shot at a response, but, as has been made clear in the debate, is very much a case of work in progress with far more to come. The report has sounded the alarm, but we all understand that there is far more to be done before we can say that we have responded properly to the alert that has been given.

The report set a good precedent for co-operation between parties. As the first of the Front-Bench speakers, I can say that it is my party's intention to offer full co-operation with the Government, on a party basis, on ensuring that the recommendations are not just implemented but vigorously pursued. We need to remind ourselves on occasions that just as we urge ethnic and faith groups in the outside world to work together towards common objectives and to promote social cohesion, there are occasions when political parties have to do the same. In dealing with this matter, my party is ready to do that formally and informally.

We also need to recognise—perhaps this is the first of the outsider's viewpoints—that we can get very wrapped up in recognising what the problem is but not face up to the fact that there are legitimate and deeply held differences within society and between faiths and ethnic groups. We must accept that at every phase we need to work together to achieve common objectives while recognising the right of others to have different views and to express them robustly on occasion. I want to place it on the record that we believe that the common values on which we need to work together are the preservation of a free and fair society in this country, and the protection of minorities and of minority rights. That is right ethically and, for some of us, is right from a religious perspective. In addition, on a much more utilitarian basis, a safer, more prosperous and secure society for everybody can only delivered be through such an approach. In other words, we are driven by both a pragmatic and an ethical response.

I want to say clearly that nothing can justify hate crime, whether that constitutes terror attacks at one end of the spectrum or sending people to Coventry at the other. It is quite right for the law and society to put measures in place that punish and deter people from hate crimes and avoid such situations occurring. A foundation for that has been put in place by the report when it mentions adopting a common and widely understood definition of what discrimination is. It says that the methodology of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry should be adopted and that it is what appears to be discriminatory to the victim that counts. I was very impressed by the inquiry's report of the work of the Community Security Trust, of which I was not previously aware. I was also impressed by what the trust has done—perhaps not deliberately—to rebut one of the criticisms of such an approach to a definition of discrimination, which is that if discrimination is defined according to the eyes of the victim, that may provoke a lot of groundless complaints based on other causes. The evidence is there for that in the report and it should be put on the record that the Community Security Trust is rigorous in weeding out complaints that are not in fact about anti-Semitism. I hope that those who might be inclined to criticise that process will take note of that as it is an important rebuttal.

I come now to recording, which is the first matter that I want to ask the Government about. The report states that only seven of the 43 police forces in England have effective ways of recording anti-Semitic incidents. The Government's response to recommendation 7 is pretty faint-hearted. It does not say anything about changing things, but simply states that they are in favour of things getting better. I would like the Minister to say in plain terms what he plans to do about the recording of incidents.

[Andrew Stunell]

My second question is, to which Minister should I address my remarks? We might have expected the Minister who deals with local government and cohesion to respond to this report, but perhaps the Minister will tell us that he deals with that and everything is fine. However, I notice that according to the Government's response it was the former Minister for Local Government, now the Minister for the Environment, who dealt with the issue. I want an assurance that the seniority and importance that was given to this matter will be carried forward in the new departmental arrangements.

Will the Minister say something about exactly what area he is responsible for? Is it England; England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; or sometimes one and sometimes the other? What is his area of responsibility when it comes to tackling this issue? That does not in any way imply a criticism that the approach might be different in different places. A different policy approach in different parts of the United Kingdom is not a bad thing; in some respects it is a positively good thing. For instance, the Government's response to the issue of the protection of Jewish property points out that the Scottish Executive have already set aside a fund of £1 million to deal with synagogues in Scotland. That is obviously a good thing and I would not want a United Kingdom-wide new initiative to blot that out. We should ensure that if there is good practice in one part of the United Kingdom, we borrow and import it into other parts of the UK.

My third question—if it is not in fact the fourth—is whether the Government intend actively to manage a programme or whether they simply plan to tick a few boxes. For instance, the Government response refers to the fact that the Commission on Integration and Cohesion will be producing a report. The timing of the writing of the Government's response meant that it came before that report was produced. The commission has now reported and it would be good if the Minister could say what the implications of its report are on the programme that the Government intend to pursue.

I wish to say clearly that nothing justifies hate crimes, discrimination against individuals and their property, or discrimination against a whole religion or ethnic group. At the risk of being boring and repetitious, I wish to make the point that anti-Semitism is wrong. I make that point because a central matter of contention is whether the behaviour of a nation state—good or bad—can or should legitimise such behaviour or discrimination. I wish to say clearly that it does not. Discrimination is real and, in preparation for this debate, a briefing was provided to me by a senior Jewish member of the Liberal Democrats. I want to quote a couple of points that he put to me. He reminded me that the British Muslims who were convicted in the Crevice trial had a list of synagogues in their possession as a possible target. He went on to say that every

> "Jewish community in the UK takes this threat so seriously that it is spending £3million, via the CST, to bomb-proof the windows of every Jewish building in the country."

That is £3 million and I note that the Scottish Executive have allocated £1 million. It would be a powerful signal if the Minister said that the Government are prepared to allocate the other £2 million for the rest of the United Kingdom.

I do not want to make a partisan point, but it is important for us to recognise that political parties have a role that we are not yet fully playing. Another point put to me by a senior Jewish member of the Liberal Democrats was:

> "Many of us experienced personal anti Semitism. In my last Parliamentary campaign the Labour team canvassed on behalf of 'the Christian Gentleman' to show that I was not 'acceptable'... I lost by a very small margin".

I emphasise that that is not a partisan point and I am well aware that it would be quite possible for people to intervene on me and draw my attention to Liberal Democrats who have behaved in an inappropriate way. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) was quite right and frank in what he said and I want to be quite right and frank in what I say. None of us can say that we are without fault in this; we all have work to do to improve our approach to this issue.

Mrs. Ellman: I accept with all seriousness the points that the hon. Gentleman is making. Is he aware that during the last general election in Rochdale, the then Member for Rochdale, Lorna Fitzsimons, reported that the Muslim Public Affairs Committee distributed a leaflet that claimed that she was Jewish, which she is not, as a reason for not voting for her? Does he think that there should have been a stronger dissociation of a political party from that leaflet put out during that campaign?

Andrew Stunell: I only became aware of that when I read the report. I of course share her concern about that.

I was making the point that the behaviour of a particular nation state cannot justify discriminatory action against individuals. There is also the inverse point that the robust criticism of the behaviour of a nation state should not be automatically interpreted as an attack on the integrity, the standing or the legitimacy of individuals. Let me give a simple example. I completely condemn the illegal invasion of Iraq, but that does not make me anti-British, except perhaps in the eyes of some right-wing commentators. That invasion does not legitimise terrorist actions against Britons, either at home or overseas. Similarly, I condemn the illegal occupation of Arab lands by Israeli settlers, but that does not make me anti-Semitic. It cannot be used to legitimise attacks on Jews in this country in any context.

That brings us to the disturbing issue of academic freedom. Robust polemic and a rigorous search for truth are at the heart of the academic and learning process, but so too must be the freedom to do that in an open and accepting climate without fear and with personal and mutual respect. It is clear that the UCU boycott, whether designed to be a boycott or designed to sound as though it is one, is utterly wrong. If it is a boycott, it is wrong, for all the reasons stated by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) and others, and because it cuts across the whole ethos of the academic climate in this country that has developed over the years. It is wrong because it hits the wrong targets and quite clearly is discriminatory against one religious and ethnic group. I support the point that is in the report, and which my hon. Friend made, about how we will need race equality impact assessments if the boycott goes any further.

If, of course, it is just pretending to be a boycott—presumably so that it can gain credit with extremists without actually doing anything—a good analogy, and appropriate in the circumstances, would be Pontius Pilate. It is just washing its hands and trying to get the credit—a "Not me, guv!" sort of thing. If that is the case, it is absolutely scandalous. I do not think that there is any division in this House about that, and if the Minister can give us any pointers to action that the Government and Ministers in the relevant Department are prepared to take, it would be helpful. We should send a message in this debate to Universities UK saying that whatever its briefing says, and whatever might have happened so far, if from now on it will at least be fully engaged with this House, the Government and the all-party inquiry so that we can tackle things vigorously, that would be very encouraging indeed.

I would like to see more muscle in the Government's responses. Okay, it is early days and there are good reasons why, at the moment, they are not as forthcoming as I would like, but please can the Minister tell us that he is absolutely determined to put in that muscle to ensure results? Will we see more signs of action from the Government and not simply good intentions? Will he assure us that there will be more cross-border work in all its meanings? England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are each producing different responses, which is not bad; I am not asking for a uniform response, but for an evaluation of the responses being made and the application of best practice wherever possible.

For instance, I noticed that the Government's response records that Northern Ireland universities have a statutory duty to deal with religious and ethnic discrimination. Is that a route that ought to be looked at for English universities? Then there are border issues relating to our work with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the European Union. Again, there are plenty of opportunities for co-ordination and learning, and maybe for the UK Government to export best practice else where.

I think that this has been a very valuable inquiry and the Government's response is a good start, but there is much more work to be done, and I look forward to working with the Minister and, I hope, the official Opposition in tackling this and taking it forward.

4.34 pm

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir John. Like the Minister, I have been translated from the great spaces of the Finance Bill into community cohesion. I have not yet had the chance to welcome him to his new position, which I now do. I suppose that this is my debut in this field.

I should like to pick up on a point made by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell). I think that we should all like to have some clarity about who ultimately is responsible in this area. Is it the Minister present or another refugee from the Finance Bill, the Minister for Local Government? I am sure that the Minister present will answer that question when he responds to this debate, which has been a very fine one. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on the way in which he introduced it and on commissioning the report. I congratulate also the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) on chairing the inquiry.

I have a number of particular interests: my background is Jewish, although it is not the religion that I try to practise. Furthermore, I have the largest percentage of Muslim constituents of any official Opposition MP. So there is never a dull moment. I think that I can say fairly, therefore, that I see several angles on the issues involved. The debate has been a model for other debates on the violation of human dignity, whether that violation is based on ethnicity or religion. I, certainly, would welcome similar debates on, for example, Islamophobia.

I want to make it clear that I agree with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove that this is an area for an all-party consensus, and I welcome much of the Government's response, although, as all Ministers know, there is always more to do. I shall come to that point in a moment. I think that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw was absolutely right to intimate that all racism is evil. There is a particular horror of anti-Semitism for people with roots in western Europe as a result of the holocaust. I think that it has to be acknowledged that the roots of anti-Semitism in western Europe lie partly in Christian replacement theology, from which, thankfully, the Roman Catholic Church and a number of others have now distanced themselves, since Vatican II.

Against the, in some cases, horrifying pictures painted this afternoon by hon. Members, particularly some of the alarming information given by the hon. Member for Worsley (Barbara Keeley), it is important to set what my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) quoted the Chief Rabbi as saying when he gave evidence, which was that, by and large, Britain is not an anti-Semitic country. In general, and certainly compared with other countries, I believe that Britain has been a good home for Jews, as well as for people of many other ethnic backgrounds.

I am trying to respond to a few themes only and to draw them together in this way: I think that it has emerged from the debate that organised anti-Semitism, until relatively recently, has been monopolised by British neo-Nazis and elements of the indigenous left and right. Government Members were courageous to sign up in the report to the statement quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry. We have heard evidence that contemporary anti-Semitism in Britain is found more commonly on the left than on the right. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) referred to the *New Statesman* cover, which was an alarming manifestation of that trend, although I should say in return that all parties have their own sinister corners. However, I admire the way in which members of the commission faced and signed up to that statement.

It has emerged also that that monopoly has been broken in recent years by separatist extremists who claim to act in the name of Islam. It is important, right at the start, to stress, as did the right hon. Member for Rotherham, that those separatists do not represent the Islamic mainstream, which in my constituency is represented by bodies such as the Wycombe Islamic Mission and Mosque Trust, and that there is much local co-operation on the ground up and down Britain between Jews and Muslims. I am nervous of citing examples from Manchester, because hon. Members present know more about it than I do, but the Community Security Trust has cited

[Mr. Paul Goodman]

in a brief the Muslim-Jewish forum in Greater Manchester. There are, of course, others.

At best, the separatists are opposed to terrorism in Britain, but they regard Jews, Christians and members of other religions and none as kufr, which is a derogatory term for non-Muslims and which in itself contrasts with the authentic Islamic view of both Jews and Christians as "people of the Book". At worst, the separatists support terrorism in Britain, as we have seen from a procession of events, from the Dhiren Barot plot, which, significantly, took place before the invasion of Iraq, all the way through to the most recent attack on Glasgow airport.

It is vital to emphasise—the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, picked up this point very acutely—that synagogues and other Jewish targets in Britain are potential terrorist targets. There is a long list of such attacks abroad. The House will remember the bombing of the synagogue in Istanbul. It is significant, as the hon. Gentleman said, that the Crevice trial convicts were found with a list of synagogues in their possession.

Having established that what I described as a monopoly has been broken and having time to respond to only a few themes, I shall question the Minister about the Government's response to the abuse of universities, which have come up a great deal in the debate, and prisons, which have not come up so much, as potential incubators of anti-Semitism by extremists.

Let me deal first with universities. The Minister will be aware of claims by Professor Anthony Glees of Brunel university that extremist groups or terror groups are active in up to 30 British universities. Some of those, by the way, are BNP or what are traditionally known as extreme-right groups. If he has read Ed Husain's book "The Islamist"—he is being urged this afternoon by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber to do so—he will be aware that it is the practice of extreme groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, of which Ed Husain was a member, to operate in that way, and that at least one member of a university Islamic society has been charged with terrorist offences.

Does the Minister agree with Trevor Phillips that the response of vice-chancellors to anti-Semitic activity has been "patchy"—my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry referred to that—and will he commend universities such as Birmingham, which the report identified, that have very strong safeguards in place in relation to visiting speakers? What practical steps are the Government taking to ensure that a working group comprising Universities UK and a committee of vice-chancellors is set up on the issue? The hon. Member for Bassetlaw made it pretty clear that there has been an element of institutional resistance and that that perhaps continues.

On the vexed question of the proposed so-called boycott, will the Minister pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) about the Government encouraging the University and College Union to conduct a race equality impact assessment on any boycott policy?

I asked the Secretary of State for Education and Skills a while ago, before I was moved to my current duties, how many faculties, chairs and other facilities in relation to Islamic studies in universities were funded from abroad. Obviously, we have no objection in principle to funding coming to universities from abroad. However, we are concerned about funding from separatists whose mode of thought is, among other things, anti-Semitic. I received the following answer:

"This information is not collected centrally".—[*Official Report*, 11 June 2007; Vol. 462, c. 792W.]

I should like to know why not.

In the current circumstances, prisons are equally a cause of concern. The Minister, like other hon. Members, will be aware that there is a claimed link between prisons and separatist and therefore terrorist indoctrination. Richard Reid, the attempted shoe bomber, is alleged to have been radicalised in Feltham young offenders institution. Muktar Said Ibrahim, the leader of the 21/7 gang, is alleged to have been indoctrinated in Feltham or Aylesbury young offenders institutions, or in both. It is claimed that imams at both institutions were suspended in 2002 amid fears that they were preaching extremism.

Like the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, I am sorry to bombard the Minister with questions that might properly be directed at the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills or the Home Department, but bombarding him with these questions illustrates the point that this issue goes right across Departments. I should be obliged if, as well as furnishing the right hon. Member for Rotherham with the information from the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills that he requested, he could obtain a reply from the Home Office on some of the points that I am raising.

John Mann: It may assist the hon. Gentleman to recall the commitment from the previous Prime Minister, Mr. Blair, when the report was taken to him that there would be one Minister from one Department co-ordinating the Government response and its implementation across all Departments.

Mr. Goodman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because it gives me the chance to make the point that has already been made by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove: we would like a little more clarity about how exactly that mechanism will work.

It is pretty clear that there is a danger, first, that non-terrorist prisoners will be indoctrinated into anti-Semitism inter alia and, secondly, that just as Northern Ireland's prisons during the 1970s and 1980s became universities of terrorism as republican and loyalist prisoners swapped information on experiences and planned strategy, so our own prisons have the potential to become universities of terrorism and, by extension, universities of anti-Semitism, if that is not a contradiction in terms. Anne Owers, the chief inspector of prisons, was quoted last weekend in *The Observer* as raising concerns about Feltham and saying that there was

"concern among some staff that a small minority of young people were being coerced into joining the Muslim faith"

and I bet that that is not the mainstream version that operates in my constituency and others.

What is the Government's strategy for combating the growth of extremism and anti-Semitism in prisons and if they have not published it, will they do so? How many imams have been suspended from British prisons for extremism or any other reason since 9/11? Again, before

I was moved to my current duties, I asked the Home Secretary in a written question if he would name the imams who had served as prison chaplains in each year since 2001. I was told:

"There is no central record that holds this information."—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2007; Vol. 457, c. 1764W.]

That is worrying.

Mr. MacShane: I was very surprised at the reply that I received this week to a written question that I had tabled asking the Department for Communities and Local Government how many mosques there were in the UK. I was told:

"The information requested is not held centrally."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 368W.]

Frankly, all that is required is a letter to local authorities asking how many mosques they have. It is quite preposterous that the Government do not know how many mosques there are in our own country or, for that matter, churches or synagogues.

Mr. Goodman: I do not want in any way to upset the right hon. Gentleman, but I have to tell him that my recollection is that I asked a similar question and I received an answer. I will send him that answer and perhaps we will have a chance to clear this up.

Mr. MacShane: The power of the Opposition.

Mr. Goodman: I thought that the right hon. Gentleman might say something like that.

To return to the central record, I was told that it would not be appropriate to provide the names of the imams fulfilling the role of prison chaplain. I think that I can guess the reason for that—there may be legitimate security concerns—but I would just like to hear it from the Government, rather than be told:

"It would...not be appropriate to provide the names of those filling this role."—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2007; Vol. 457, c. 1764W.]

Although I am a bit happier with the written answers that I am receiving from the Government than a Government Member and ex-Minister is, I am not completely satisfied.

Again, picking up the lead of the right hon. Gentleman, I shall say a few words about the Government, Muslim partners and anti-Semitism. Clearly, Governments work with faith-based organisations of all religions and none as partners, and that is entirely proper. The Muslim Council of Britain was, for a long period, the main Muslim partner of Conservative and Labour Governments. The legend is, and I have no reason to doubt it, that the MCB was partly put together by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) when he was the Home Secretary. The MCB has always opposed terrorism in Britain, but the former Communities and Local Government Secretary, who is now the Secretary of State for Transport, was none the less sufficiently concerned about separatist tendencies within the MCB to announce that the Government's

"strategy of funding and engagement must shift significantly towards those organisations that are taking a proactive leadership role in tackling extremism"—

which, of course, includes anti-Semitism—

"and defending our shared values."

She was also the main speaker at a Sufi Muslim Council Mawlid in the House of Commons earlier this year, which was hosted by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Mahmood) and me.

I return to Mr. Bunglawala. It is a matter of record that he has said:

"The Jews consider themselves to be God's chosen people—although the blessed prophet Jesus called them the children of the devil—and so can do...whatever...they like".

He is also on record as saying:

"The chairman of Carlton Communications is Michael Green of the tribe of Judah. He has joined an elite club whose members include fellow Jews Michael Grade...and Alan Yentob. The three are reported to be 'close friends'...so that's what they mean by a free media".

I was going to quote from the "The Islamist", but the ever-attentive right hon. Member for Rotherham has beaten me to it.

I gather that Mr. Bunglawala has since repented of those views, just as he has repented of his description of Osama bin Laden as a freedom fighter. None the less, all that is a reminder of how careful all political parties have to be when selecting partner organisations to work with. Does the Minister believe that the MCB is taking the necessary leadership role? Will the shift that was announced by the last Secretary of State continue under the new one?

I conclude by reflecting on the nature and implications of anti-Semitism. To the social historian, Christianity grew at least partly out of Judaism, just as—again to the social historian—Islam drew on the Jewish experience. Therefore, anti-Semitism is not simply a repudiation of one group on the ground of ethnicity, barbarous though that is and represented as it is by the obscenity of the holocaust. It is also, by implication and extension, a repudiation of the institutions, culture and values of the western world in general and, for us as parliamentarians, of Britain in particular. Those values are ultimately founded on the inviolable dignity of the human person.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): It is a privilege to have you in the Chair, Sir John. It has been an interesting and excellent debate. That phrase is often bandied about in Westminster Hall, but I think that everyone who has participated would agree that it is the case.

I commend and applaud the parliamentary inquiry as an important contribution to the work to eliminate anti-Semitism. I note in particular that the membership was genuinely cross-party and that a strong consensus on ways to tackle anti-Semitism was developed through the process. Politicians are often criticised about yah-boo politics—I am conscious that two by-elections are being held today in which the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties are trying to tear each other apart—and it is gratifying and makes me proud to be a Member of a House in which greater and nobler causes such as the elimination of bigotry and hatred are advanced. We have seen evidence of that today.

[Mr. Iain Wright]

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have raised many points, which I should like to address individually. I commend the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) has done on this issue over many years, and I pay tribute to his high-quality chairmanship of the all-party group. I am pleased that he recognised the importance that the Government have placed on racism in general and anti-Semitism in particular by providing a formal response to the parliamentary inquiry. Hon. Members have said that we must all, in all our lives, try to change bigotry and hatred. That is important. The good publicity that came out of the report's publication in September and, hopefully, the publicity that will emanate from today's debate will help to push that culture in trying to tackle anti-Semitism head on and ensure that it is not tolerated in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw talked about civic society and football clubs. I pay tribute to the "Let's Kick Racism Out of Football" campaign of the past few years, which has played an enormous part in reducing levels of tension in football. We are not there yet—far from it—but it has made a valuable contribution. He and other hon. Members also mentioned universities, which I shall spend some time on later.

My hon. Friend asked specific questions, to which I shall now respond. He asked which Minister will have responsibility for matters of anti-Semitism and co-ordinating the Government's role on that issue. It was made clear to me before the debate, and abundantly clear in the debate, how important hon. Members feel it is to have a clear, single point of reference—a single Minister—to co-ordinate activity on this issue across Government. I understand that no decision has been made on that yet, but the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda), is in charge of faith and cohesion, and it is likely that he will be in charge of taking forward the elimination of anti-Semitism. I pledge to take a personal interest in the matter. I am proud to be a former chair of Labour Friends of Israel, and I shall tell the Department that there is an urgent need for a single point of contact, and ensure that the matter is resolved as quickly as possible.

John Mann: May I make the point gently to the Minister that there might be significant disquiet should we be in recess without a clear point of contact?

Mr. Wright: As I said, I am aware of the strength and depth of feeling on that. I know that we are a week away from recess and I shall endeavour to ensure that the matter is resolved as quickly as possible.

Mr. Boswell: I accept the spirit of the Minister's assurances. Whoever the single point of contact is, it is vital that that person chases up his or her counterparts through Whitehall, because we need to ensure that the whole system is working, not just the relationship with his Department.

Mr. Wright: My hon. Friend—I make that mistake deliberately—makes an important point, and I shall take it back to the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw made some points about the task group, including about the frequency of its meetings and how it is going to move forward. The task group, which consists of Jewish stakeholders and representatives of various Departments, meets four times a year. The first meeting was on 20 June. I undertake that the Government will give a progress report one year after the publication of the Government's response, which will be March 2008, regarding how we are moving forward. He also asked about the £20,000 budget for promoting the group's work. That money is still available and will continue to be. I hope that he can take some reassurance from that.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), who is a decent and civilised man for whom I have much respect, said that we should set an example. That has been one of the themes of the debate, and it must be pushed forward. If we walk on by, tolerate and are indifferent to the idea of anti-Semitism, that is almost as bad—it might be worse—than landing a punch. We need to address that, and I pay tribute to his comments.

The hon. Gentleman particularly mentioned setting an example in respect of universities. I agree with his point that it would be wrong for Government to start dictating what can be discussed in universities, as that is a dangerous path. When the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education visited Israel on 9 June, he made the Government's unequivocal position clear: we condemn the proposed boycott of Israeli goods. I hope that the hon. Members who are present can take some comfort from that. What was said was damning and unequivocal.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) mentioned—in his usual high-quality and eloquent way, which I can never equal—the horrific bigotry that continues. He mentioned Islamic anti-Semitism. It is odd, if not disturbing and distressing, that a beautiful and peaceful religion such as Islam can be distorted with such hatred in the way that such a small minority have done. He gave striking and vivid examples of Jew hating and anti-Semitism. When he was talking, I remembered the comments made a year or two ago by Iran's President Ahmadinejad that Israel is a blot on the landscape and that it should be wiped off the face of the earth. The fact that a state in the United Nations can say that of another and not receive overwhelming global condemnation is astonishing. We should be pushing, both inside and outside this House, to rail against such a comment and against the fact that Tehran can host a holocaust denial conference. We should be doing a lot more.

One of today's themes has been that if we do not challenge, we implicitly accept the idea that anti-Semitism is acceptable. I can give clear assurances that the Government will not tolerate such a stance. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley (Barbara Keeley) mentioned funding for security of Jewish buildings. The Government are happy to provide advice to organisations and to industry about protective security—that is usually arranged through the National Security Advice Centre—but we have a policy whereby we do not fund the provision of protective security for organisations or industry. That is true not only in respect of Jewish groups, but across the board in respect of different racial and social groups. Our strategy is based on making advice available,

should it be requested, free of charge, but it is up to the recipients whether or not they take it, and if they do, they pay for the work.

Barbara Keeley: I want to emphasise that the point that I was making was about the protection of children at schools. I see a difference between the average buildings—community buildings of a variety of sorts—and the protection of children at school. Does the Minister think that there is a difference between schools and other community buildings?

Mr. Wright: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I cannot pledge anything today, but I shall take her comments away and see whether anything can be done, because she raises a valid point. I do not want to give false hope. It is right that the Government have a policy on this, because if we fund one group, we would have to fund all, and that could prove problematic.

On the wider point of the security of Jewish buildings, the Metropolitan police's rainbow team, which involves uniformed policing and the response to counter-terrorism, has been working with the Community Security Trust, which is a registered charity that is working to ensure the safety and security of the Jewish community, over the past year on the security of Jewish buildings. The CST has identified 300 buildings across London about which it has security concerns. The rainbow team has worked with the CST to quantify the threat and risk by examining objective factors, such as whether a building has underground parking, CCTV or bollards outside it. As a result of that exercise, some buildings have been identified to undergo a crime reduction survey, while others have been put on a frequent visit programme. Such visits are undertaken by safer neighbourhood teams. In response to the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley, I should say that perhaps that could be done in conjunction with Jewish schools. I shall examine the issue further.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) mentioned the Government's plans to ensure that the police should record anti-Semitic crimes more fully. That was an excellent point. The Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers have given an undertaking that all forces will record anti-Semitic crimes by 2008-09. I hope that he can take reassurance from that.

Andrew Stunell: Will the Minister clarify whether that specifically includes anti-Semitic crimes as a sub-group of racial attacks? We need to be clear that we are separating out the information that is available.

Mr. Wright: I understand that that will be the case.

I thank the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) for his presence, although I was expecting the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). That is a private joke from our consideration of the Finance Bill—I shall not bore you with the details, Sir John.

The hon. Member for Wycombe congratulated me on my coming to the Treasury Bench, so may I congratulate him on his move? He made some excellent points. I was particularly struck by the one about extremism in prisons. Given the nature of the prison system, community engagement is limited mainly to the resettlement of prisoners. Work is ongoing in the Prison Service and the National Offender Management Service to provide assistance to prisoners during their time in prison and in order to rehabilitate them into their community.

I particularly want to draw the attention of hon. Members to the extremist prisoners working group. Peter Atherton, deputy director-general of the Prison Service, has chaired a series of seminars to consider the strategic policy and operational issues surrounding radicalisation and extremism in the specific context of prisons. A report setting out the current working practices, issues to be resolved and an implementation and action plan is being produced, and it is anticipated that it will be published at the end of October. That directly answers the hon. Gentleman's point and I hope that he can take reassurance from that.

One of today's other themes has been an almost universal concern about the rise of anti-Semitism, both in this country and across Europe. That concern is shared by the Government. It is unfortunately well founded, given the fact that the CST recorded 594 anti-Semitic incidents in 2006—that is the highest annual total since the CST began recording in 1984. Of those incidents, 112 were violent anti-Semitic assaults, four of which were potentially life-threatening. There were 70 incidents of damage and desecration to Jewish property, which included nine desecrations of Jewish cemeteries. Of major concern is the fact that Jewish schools or schoolchildren were targeted in 59 incidents, so I fully take on board the point made eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley. In 25 cases, the incidents took place against Jewish schoolchildren on their journey to or from school. So we are not necessarily talking about incidents on school estates themselves, and that also might need to be examined.

In the light of all this, it is important that we recognise that anti-Semitism has not been taken as seriously as other forms of hatred in some parts of our society. That is simply not acceptable and it is right that we take concerted steps to deal with the situation. Whether anti-Semitism comes from the far left, the far right or from so-called Islamist extremists, it must be understood for what it is and condemned. It should be dealt with promptly and effectively through the law. We must do everything that we can to prevent anti-Semitism occurring.

Britain has a strong legislative framework to protect people from harassment and hate, and I should like to mention some of the legal safeguards at length later in my contribution. We cannot be complacent and allow things to happen. We need to have a zero-tolerance approach and ensure that the powers on the statute book are complied with and enforced. I hope that everyone will take away that important point.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to tackling all forms of hate crime and racial intolerance, including anti-Semitism, wherever it exists. We have one of the world's strongest legal frameworks for protecting people from discrimination and persecution on the basis of race or faith, and that has been significantly tightened in recent years. It is also important to note that the UK leads the way on the recording and monitoring of racist crime, including anti-Semitism. The UK's excellent example has been acknowledged in successive reports by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, now the Fundamental Rights Agency. As hon. Members have said, we recall more than seems to be the case, and

[Mr. Iain Wright]

it looks as if we are a more racist or anti-Semitic country than we are, but we are taking the matter seriously. I hope that other countries will follow.

I am pleased to see wider progress away from the focus on criminal acts. The report noted concern about the tone of the general discourse, for example. Open and public debate is one thing, but rhetoric with an undercurrent of hate and racism is quite another. We need practical ways to tackle that rhetoric. That is why I remain concerned about recent calls in academia to boycott contact with academics working in Israel. Such boycotts threaten academic freedom and intellectual exchange, and cannot be acceptable.

Lecturers in the new university and college lecturers' union should be given every support to combat selective boycotts that are anti-Jewish in principle. I urge the new union's executive and leadership to oppose the boycott. Alongside that, I urge them to take seriously the problems being experienced by Jewish students on some university campuses. That has been articulated very well today. I know that Universities UK is involved in that debate, and I urge it to go further. Universities should be centres for constructive dialogue and exchange of views that lead to better understanding of issues, and of people and their backgrounds. No one is disputing the right to criticise, or to criticise Israel, but a place where differences and diversity are welcomed and valued for adding new dimensions to the dialogue, and new ideas developed in partnership at the expense of hate, should be the norm rather than the exception.

Mrs. Ellman: Is the Minister aware that boycott campaigns and boycott resolutions have been passed by Unison and the Transport and General Workers Union, which is part of the new Unite union? Does he see those acts, with the proposed academic boycott in colleges and universities, as yet another illustration of singling out Israel as evil above all other nations?

Mr. Wright: I was disappointed with the T and G call for a boycott. I am a member of the GMB, and trade unionism is based on fairness, equality and a free exchange of ideas, so it is astonishing that a trade union can condemn a country in that way. I share my hon. Friend's concern.

Returning to the boycott in academia, it is not acceptable for Jewish students to be attacked in that way, either verbally or physically. It is not acceptable for people to incite the sort of behaviour among students that was so eloquently described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham.

During the debate in the other place reference was made to the strong legislative framework on race crime. Britain has in place one of the strongest legislative frameworks to protect people from harassment and abuse, and specifically racial or religious persecution. That legislation protects Jewish people alongside other racial and ethnic groups. The Race Relations Act 1976 imposes on public authorities, including higher education institutions, a positive duty to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, and to promote race equality and relations between different racial groups.

Mr. Boswell: Will the Minister pay particular attention to concern in the university sector as to whether that public duty binds a university's management, vice-chancellor and court, and whether it is applicable to the student union? I am a little sensitive about the matter, because I introduced the legislation some time ago. Will the Minister undertake at least to look at that point in detail, and to explore it with the universities?

Mr. Wright: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I am not at liberty to give a definitive answer, but I can pledge to look at the matter.

There are other examples on the statute book of strong protection against harassment, so additional legislative powers are not necessary to cover higher education institutions and so on, but it is important that existing provisions are enforced and complied with.

John Mann: The Minister has provided a strong explanation of the law. Will he ensure that the cross-departmental taskforce has at the top of the agenda for its next meeting an analysis of why there have been so few prosecutions in view of the law's strength, and consideration of the role of the Crown Prosecution Service and others in bringing forward prosecutions?

Mr. Wright: I have asked the cross-departmental hate crime taskforce to take the matter up as a matter of urgency, and it will consider ways forward. I hope that that reassures my hon. Friend. I have taken the matter on board personally, because compliance and enforcement are crucial.

Hon. Members referred to the internet, but not as much as I thought they would. Today's students are very much the internet generation, and they have access to reams of information, some of which helps them with their studies, but some of which exposes them to dangerous views and campaigns. That applies not just to students. The internet is open to the wider population, including children, which is a particular concern to me. Anti-Semitism on the net is a hate crime, and when a UK internet service provider is told that it is hosting offensive or anti-Semitic material, we should recognise and applaud the fact that it has a good record in removing it promptly. The police also have specific powers to deal with terrorist-related material. However, I believe we could do better in ensuring that service providers and the police find out about all such material more quickly.

With that in mind, the Association of Chief Police Officers has agreed to improve its advice on what to do when an internet hate crime is spotted. Recognising that many internet sites are not hosted in this country, Foreign Office Ministers have raised the matter with Governments of other countries, including in the middle east. I hope that that reassures my right hon. Friend the for Rotherham who made the point so eloquently. Foreign Office Ministers have obtained agreement among the G8 countries to co-operate further on that.

We should be clear that our policy in this country is robustly to tackle hate crime in whatever form or media it appears. Alongside that, we aim to build community cohesion so that communities draw strength from their diversity and celebrate what they all share, rather than remaining divided by difference. Tackling prejudice is an important part of building cohesive communities so

that people from all backgrounds develop their shared future, find common solutions to shared problems, and live and work together.

I believe the Chief Rabbi suggested that people should be bilingual, with a common language of citizenship and a second language connecting us to family and group traditions. Faith groups, including the Jewish community, have a crucial role to play in making the links and the bridges, and developing that common language.

Mr. Goodman: I intervened simply because the Minister seems to be drawing to the end of his peroration, and naturally has not had time to answer all the questions that have been raised. Will he assure us that he will write in reply to any unanswered questions, such as mine about the funding of university faculties from abroad?

Mr. Wright: Certainly I can give that pledge, but I hope that it will not disappoint the hon. Gentleman to hear that I do not intend to wrap up yet. I shall be on my feet for some time, and I apologise to hon. Members.

Informing the inquiry's report was the vast and varied contribution that the Jewish community makes, has made and will continue to make to this country. Socially, economically and culturally it has enriched British society as a whole, but it is one of a number of faith communities that can bring people together at local level, opening channels of dialogue and creating shared projects that give people of all faiths a shared stake in their community. We are helping many of those organisations to play a full role in developing cohesion through the faith communities capacity building fund, which is administered by my Department. Through this, we have supported a group of British imams and rabbis that have been meeting for the past three years. A result of those meetings and identifying joint priorities was the first national Muslim-Jewish women's conference, which was held in March.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove mentioned the devolved Administrations. They are also doing a great deal. Many of the projects are similar to the initiatives about which I have already spoken, and they have been taken forward in particularly Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish ways by the devolved Administrations. The Government's response to the group's report says:

"Scottish Ministers have supported a separate annual Scottish Holocaust Memorial Day. Since 2001 so that communities could mobilise around an event for Scotland. Scotland also hosted the main UK event in 2003 in Edinburgh in partnership with the Home Office and Edinburgh City Council...The Welsh Assembly Government is fully committed to eradicating all forms of racial and religious discrimination and to promoting community cohesion. The government works with all faith groups through various forums including its Faith Communities Forum, chaired by the First Minister."

Andrew Stunell: I am grateful to the Minister for drawing our attention to the Government's response. Will he assure us that the best practice from each nation will be taken into account and propagated elsewhere? When a Minister is appointed to that decisive role about which he has spoken, will that person take personal responsibility both for informing themselves about the initiatives and for ensuring that that good practice is circulated?

Mr. Wright: Yes, I will certainly take that forward and ensure that best practice is disseminated through the taskforce and through other means.

On my final lap I shall turn to education, because Members have said that education is the key to changing cultures and attitudes. There is a generational issue. My grandparents grew up during and fought in the second world war, and they feel revulsion and horror towards anti-Semitism, largely as a result of learning about the final solution and the holocaust. My generation does not tend to have that feeling, and certainly the generations coming forward now do not seem to have that direct connection with the horrors of anti-Semitism. It is therefore important that the holocaust and other matters relating to anti-Semitism, such as the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, are taught in schools. The Blackburn school linking project, which brought together 14-year-old girls from schools in the Wirral, Preston and Blackburn, shows how successful such activity can be. Despite coming from very different backgrounds, the girls quickly discovered that they had a great deal in common, so new guidance will encourage linking as a way forward.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is also working with faith schools, which are another core part of the local cohesion picture. Indeed, the Jewish school in Birmingham, which has been mentioned in the debate, is an excellent example of promoting integration and cohesion, catering as it does for Jewish and Muslim children. However, there should also be a focus on the core curriculum to ensure that it provides opportunities to challenge racism, to understand the positive sides of migration and to value diversity. That is why I am delighted that the Government have made a £1.5 million grant to the Holocaust Educational Trust. I pay tribute in the strongest possible terms to the trust and to its work enabling children and sixth-form pupils to visit Auschwitz. It has been mentioned in the debate that enabling two students from every sixth form to visit Auschwitz is not enough. I fully accept that point, and I hope that we can move forward in ensuring that even more people can experience at first hand the horrors of the concentration camps and the final solution. That will help spread awareness of the lessons from the holocaust, and ensure that its language is respected by new generations.

There is a statutory requirement to teach about the holocaust, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families has supported holocaust memorial day in schools through the production of free educational resources to support its issues and themes. My Department's £18 million "Connecting Community Plus" grant scheme is already supporting many projects that tackle racism more widely. With fair and objective media reporting, those practical projects have a real chance to make a difference in local communities throughout the country.

I shall end—perhaps where I should have begun—with the report's first recommendation, which is about the definition of anti-Semitism. The inquiry was attracted to the European monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia—EUMC—draft definition. The Government have undertaken to re-examine that definition, if and when the EUMC's successor body, the Fundamental Rights Agency, does so. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove noted that the Government use the broader definition of a racist incident, which came from the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. It is based on the victim's perception, and we continue to regard it as a wide and

[Mr. Iain Wright]

powerful definition that shows society's abhorrence of such crimes, whether the victims are Jewish or from any other community. The fact that we have had the chance to publicise that message clearly and succinctly in the report reiterates how important the inquiry's findings and recommendations have been. We are therefore committed to taking the work of the inquiry forward, and we have established a cross-Government working group, which includes Jewish stakeholders, to ensure that our response is actioned throughout Departments.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to the inquiry's work. Moving it forward, I pledge that the Government will take it seriously and co-ordinate it properly, and I hope that we can have a similar debate sometime in the future.

John Mann: Before the Minister sits down, is he saying that when the Government respond to that progress in March 2008, there will be an opportunity to debate in the House that progress report?

Mr. Wright: That is not for me to say; it is for the business managers of the House. However, I would certainly encourage it so that we can be accountable for the progress that has been made on such an important issue as tackling anti-Semitism.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 24 July 2007

[MISS ANNE BEGG *in the Chair*]

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Roy.]*

9.30 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to have this debate and hope that at the end of it the Government will give some good news on their future strategy towards non-proliferation. I congratulate the Minister on her appointment and welcome her to the debate.

On 14 March, the House voted on the Trident issue after a long debate. An unprecedented number of Labour Members voted against a renewal of the Trident nuclear submarine system. That reflected public opinion and the views of the large number of people who contacted MPs about the issue. Nuclear arms and proliferation is not a dead issue; it is very much a live one. I want to tease out the Government's view on the non-proliferation treaty system and what their strategy is leading up to the next five-yearly review in 2010.

It is worth setting out some of the background to the non-proliferation treaty. It was envisaged in 1968 and was promoted by Ireland, among a number of other non-aligned countries, many of which had completely neutral foreign policies. I shall quote from the original documentation. The five declared nuclear weapon states, which were the United States, the Soviet Union, France, China and the United Kingdom, all eventually signed the treaty and agreed that nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices could

"not in any way assist, encourage, or induce any non-nuclear-weapon State to...acquire nuclear weapons".

They agreed not to receive, manufacture or acquire nuclear weapons or to seek to receive any assistance in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Some important statements were made and considering the treaty was signed in 1968 at the height of the cold war, it was a seminal document that countries had courage to sign up to.

The second pillar of the non-proliferation treaty was disarmament. The five declared nuclear weapon states were committed to a process of long-term disarmament. That is the heart of the issue: the five declared nuclear weapon states agreed that they would not provide the technology to enable the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the other countries who signed and who were not nuclear powers agreed not to adopt nuclear weapons in any way.

The third pillar of the treaty was the peaceful use of nuclear energy. I am completely opposed to nuclear power because it is dangerous and dangerously polluting, but it is not illegal under the terms of the NPT for a country to develop its own nuclear power industry. That is one of the issues that is at the heart of the current debate concerning relations with Iran.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and I have slightly different views on nuclear power, but not on nuclear weapons. It has effectively been proposed that there should be multilateral control of Iran's ability to reprocess material for use in its nuclear industry. If that can apply to Iran, why cannot it apply to every other country, so that we develop the ability of individual countries to use materials, which could be used against the betterment of man, more positively?

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed. Negotiations with Iran are based on Iran's wish to develop its own nuclear power industry and on whether that is a precursor to developing nuclear weapons. Clearly, nuclear power and nuclear weapons are inextricably linked; it is impossible to have nuclear weapons without nuclear reactors and a nuclear power industry, but it does not follow that by having a nuclear power industry and nuclear power reactors we get nuclear weapons. I disagree with my hon. Friend on very few things, but we do disagree on that particular subject. However, I am sure that we completely agree on the issue of nuclear weapons, which is important.

I shall set out what has happened since the NPT was signed. It grew from quite small beginnings, but there is now an impressive list of countries who have signed the non-proliferation treaty. It almost reads—I stress almost—like a list of members of the UN. The list is formidable in every conceivable way and we should be proud and supportive of that. Over the years since the original NPT was signed, countries that have tried to develop nuclear weapons have subsequently renounced the use of nuclear weapons completely. I am thinking, for example, of South Africa, which under the apartheid regime and possibly with the assistance of Israel, tried to develop a nuclear weapons system. There are uncorroborated reports that South Africa may have tried to test such weapons and it was certainly attempting to develop a weapons system. It is to the eternal credit of the African National Congress Government and former President Nelson Mandela that South Africa completely renounced the development, use and consideration of nuclear weapons in any way. We should remember that as one of Nelson Mandela's great contributions during his time as President. Argentina and Brazil also decided that they would not pursue any nuclear weapons options and a number of the former Soviet republics, particularly Ukraine, have done likewise. That has encouraged the development of nuclear-free zones around the world, particularly in Latin America. There is also an African nuclear-free zone and a developing central Asian nuclear-free zone.

Some countries have developed nuclear weapons and they are either not signatories to the NPT, have renounced the NPT, or never sought to sign the NPT in the first place. One such country is Israel, which it is reported has around 200 nuclear warheads. The reason that we know about Israel's nuclear weapons programme is that Mordechai Vanunu bravely told the world about it, after which he was spirited out of Britain into Italy. After the revelations that he made to *The Sunday Times*, he was taken from Italy to Israel where he was tried at a military court. He then spent 18 years in prison as a result, 13 of which were in solitary confinement. When he was finally released from prison, he was put under restrictive powers by the Israeli courts and has now been sentenced to a further period of imprisonment for

[Jeremy Corbyn]

talking to foreign nationals while living utterly peacefully in Jerusalem. Indeed, I am one of the people whom he has met since he came out of prison. I hope that the Minister will indicate whether the Government continue to think that Mordechai Vanunu should be given complete freedom to travel and to lead a normal life.

Miss Anne Begg (in the Chair): Order. We may have to suspend the sitting because there is a problem with the sound. I am now informed that the sound is back on.

Jeremy Corbyn: It would indeed be a shocking business if there were an attempt to silence a debate on nuclear weapons.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North) (Lab): It's not MI5 is it?

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend tempts me down the road of conspiracy theories.

Tragically, India and Pakistan have both developed nuclear weapons. Both have a delivery system and a testing capability and the nuclear stand-off between India and Pakistan in 2002 was one of the most serious threats to world peace since nuclear weapons were developed. I hope that India and Pakistan will eventually sign the non-proliferation treaty and undertake mutual nuclear disarmament because their weapons are designed as much to attack each other as anyone else. Obviously, I hope that that happens, but I must say that the existence of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan is encouraged in part by the rewarding of nuclear technology to India by the United States, after President Bush's recent visit. If we are serious about the non-proliferation treaty, countries that develop nuclear weapons should not be rewarded for doing so, but should be put under the utmost pressure to undertake nuclear disarmament.

Allegedly, North Korea has also developed nuclear weapons, around which there has been a great deal of publicity. Nuclear weapons were an aim of the North Korean regime, which has carried out a nuclear test, although there are doubts about whether it was a fully-fledged nuclear weapon. Clearly, however, North Korea had an aim and a wish to develop nuclear weapons, which is quite bizarre for a country racked by such poverty, economic difficulties and isolation. It must also be said, however, that the talks with North Korea undertaken very patiently by the six-party group have had a very interesting effect. Only last week, we saw the first delivery of fuel oil shipments to North Korea, in return for which it deactivated part of its nuclear development programme. North Korea is to be congratulated on that, and the rest of the world should use this opportunity to develop engagement rather than hostilities with North Korea, in order to encourage it down the path of disarmament. Surely, that would be a good way forward.

Lastly, I want to mention Iran, which, I suspect, will dominate much of the debate. Obviously, Iran is an oil-rich country and, at the moment, wishes to develop a nuclear power industry so that it has energy supplies for the future. That is its stated aim. I do not agree with nuclear power, but Iran is legally entitled to develop it. It is a signatory of the non-proliferation treaty and is now judged to be in breach of a supplementary protocol, which allows instant inspections of its facilities. As a result, sanctions have been applied and Iran is becoming increasingly isolated throughout the world. The rather bellicose language used particularly by the United States towards Iran is unfortunate and dangerous for the region as a whole.

Dr. Gibson: I share my hon. Friend's abhorrence of nuclear weaponry and have no time for nuclear power, which, as he said, Iran is in the process of developing. Is it not incongruous that, under the aegis of the United States, the International Atomic Energy Agency has withdrawn from Iran technical co-operation on 55 fronts, which means that it has to turn to other countries for high-class technology and expertise, which might not be up to the standards that we are used to in the west? For example, if those involved in Chernobyl were to advise Iran, would we not have fears about their knowledge not being quite up to the mark? Someone once said of the control room at Chernobyl that it looked like someone had thrown dials into a bag and tossed it against a wall.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is far more of an expert on this subject than I am, and there is a great deal of merit in what he says. If a country develops nuclear power, but there is an accident or disaster, we all suffer. Nuclear fallout does not respect national boundaries. I can think back to debates in this House after the Chernobyl disaster, when a lot of people happily sat back and said, "Well, it is all the fault of Soviet technology". The reality was that thousands of people were terminally affected by the fallout—not only those around the plant, but in Scandinavia and, indeed, this country, despite the fact that we are a very great distance from Chernobyl. That is the reality of a nuclear power system failure.

Therefore, if Iran is denied high-quality nuclear technology, and resorts to that which has far less certainty and safety, we are all at risk, not least the Iranian people and those in neighbouring countries. I urge the Minister, in her response, to tell us that the attitude taken—

Miss Anne Begg (in the Chair): Order. We have had a request from the sound person: the position where the hon. Gentleman is standing is creating a problem, so will he move to the next microphone? That should solve the problem.

Jeremy Corbyn: To the left or the right?

Miss Anne Begg (in the Chair): I leave that entirely up to the hon. Gentleman.

Jeremy Corbyn: I can assure the audience that this is a tactical move to the right only.

When the Minister replies, I hope that she will help us on the question of relations with Iran. During the hostage crisis earlier this year, I was quite relieved that the bellicose language used against Iran up until that point was toned down a great deal. In the end, diplomacy triumphed and there was no military stand-off. Surely, that must be the way forward, and I hope that she will tell us that the Government intend to engage with Iran,

rather than continually attack and criticise it. I accept that there is much to criticise in Iran concerning human rights and political rights and developments, and it is correct that those criticisms be made, but to start a quasi-military or, ultimately, military conflict would be disastrous for the whole region, particularly given the horrors in neighbouring Iraq.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has secured a very important debate at a key time in our history. Actually, it is a historic debate on a very important question. Does he think that the question of Iran, and of the middle east generally, shows that the British Government and the Americans do not understand the political dynamics in those areas? Is he aware of comments made by the Iranian envoy to the IAEA, Mr. Ali Asghar Soltanieh? He said:

"Britain does not have the right to question others when they're not complying with their obligations"—

under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Does that not pose an important question?

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed. I shall return to the NPT system in a few moments, but yes, that is an important point: we should abide by the NPT, if we expect others to do the same. The other point that the hon. Gentleman made concerning internal politics in Iran is an important one as well. We hear some incredibly simplistic reports of what goes on in Iran, and everything that the President says and the language that he uses is taken as the gospel according to the whole country. It simply is not like that. There are different power centres in Iran; the political President is one, but there are many others. We should try and understand a little bit more about the country. I commend to anyone interested in Iran Rageh Omaar's films on the BBC about life and attitudes in Iran. It is a huge, proud and important country resting on the Persian tradition, and the simplistic remarks about and attacks made on it do no good at all; in fact, they do a great deal of harm. We should have some respect for the history and position of that country.

The purpose of this debate is to tease out the Government's position on the development of a peaceful nuclear process. The Government are quite keen, apparently, on developing nuclear power stations. I am not! But in a sense that is a separate debate from the one surrounding nuclear weapons. However, the assertion that we have an independent nuclear deterrent has been questioned by many of us for many years, both in this House and in the wider peace movement in this country. I do not believe that we have an independent nuclear deterrent, but that it relies entirely on technology and information from the United States to be fired or used. In reality, we are a subdivision of the US when it comes to nuclear weapons. However, that does not stop us spending vast amounts of money on our existing nuclear weapons, the development of the Aldermaston facilities and the putative replacement of the Trident system, which could cost as much as £70 billion. That was one of the big issues—it was not the only one—in the debate on 14 March.

I hope that the Government will recognise that if we are serious about our signing of the NPT all those years ago, committing us to long-term nuclear disarmament, as well as committing all those declared non-nuclear-weapon states to not developing such weapons, it is up to us to use this historic opportunity to say that we will go no further with the Trident project and that instead we will accept the terms of the NPT.

I had the good fortune, because I am one of the national vice-chairs of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, to attend the NPT PrepCom—the preparatory committee meeting—in Vienna in April and early May this year, and I did so with great interest. I spoke at length with my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) at a seminar that was conducted in parallel to the conference and I listened very carefully to the statements made by the Russian delegation, the United States delegation, many other delegations, the European Union and the British representative who spoke at the same session.

Let me quote from the statement made by Ambassador John Duncan, the head of the UK delegation to the first preparatory committee. He said:

"Mr. Chairman, you will be aware that at the end of last year we published a White Paper explaining the reasoning behind the UK government's decision to maintain a nuclear deterrent."

He went on to explain that the UK Parliament voted to support that decision. He said:

"Firstly, I should make clear what we have decided. The UK has decided to begin the concept and design work required to make possible a replacement for our current ballistic missile submarine fleet; and to maintain the option of using the D5 missile beyond its current life expectancy.

This does not mean that we have taken an irreversible decision that commits us irrevocably to possessing nuclear weapons in 40 or 50 years' time. Indeed, our White Paper is clear that the UK remains committed to the goal of a world free from nuclear weapons."

The next part was, to me, the most interesting. Ambassador Duncan said:

"Mr Chairman, some suggest that it is hypocritical for the UK to maintain its nuclear weapons while calling on others to desist from their development. Let me make clear that the UK does not belong to an opposite camp that insists on 'non-proliferation first.' The UK fully accepts the proposition that progress must be made on the disarmament and non-proliferation tracks in parallel. The UK White Paper on the nuclear deterrent makes clear our continuing commitment to meet our disarmament obligations under Article VI of the NPT."

The interesting thing was that nobody, at that stage, had accused Britain or anybody else of being hypocritical; it was the ambassador who brought up the question of hypocrisy, which was somewhat surprising to us. He then fairly pointed out that Britain had reduced its number of nuclear warheads considerably.

I was interested in Ambassador Duncan's statement and I was obviously pleased that he was at the committee and able to make the statement, but if he or, indeed, the delegation recognises that we are likely to be charged with hypocrisy, let us lance the boil and not go there. Let us say that we fully support all the principles of the NPT, which includes us not developing nuclear weapons or continuing with the replacement of Trident.

As I understand it, the 14 March vote was a vote in principle; it did not commit us to expenditure. I would be grateful if the Minister, when she replies to the debate, could explain exactly how much money has been spent on the development of a possible replacement for Trident and what is being invested now at Aldermaston in the development of further nuclear bomb-making facilities.

Dr. Gibson: I do not know whether my hon. Friend was lucky enough to hear the speech by the previous Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), at the Carnegie foundation in Washington, in which, again, it was pointed out that nothing was for ever in terms of British foreign policy, warheads and so on, and that we are now moving to a state in which, independently, there is consideration of how far we can go and the fact that the deterrent effect may be different in different countries. So there was a chink of light from the previous Foreign Secretary, too. I just have this wonderful feeling that something is opening up and I am sorry that she lost her job.

Jeremy Corbyn: I have always known my hon. Friend to be a brilliant man, but he has read my mind on this occasion.

Mr. Drew: Or even the script.

Jeremy Corbyn: Not the script because there is no script—I cannot do scripts. I was indeed about to refer to the speech by the former Foreign Secretary to the Carnegie international non-proliferation conference on 25 June. In my view, it is a very interesting, very seminal speech and extremely well put. I shall quote a couple of extracts from it, because I think it important that the House understands what she said.

My right hon. Friend talked about the possibilities of long-term nuclear disarmament and quoted Kofi Annan. She went on to say that

"there are some very specific triggers for action—key impending decisions—that we are fast approaching."

She drew attention to the fact that START—the strategic arms reduction treaty—expires in 2009; there is not long to go. She said:

"We will need to start thinking about how we move from a bilateral disarmament framework built by the US and Russia to one more suited to our multi-polar world".

That was an interesting use of language. She went on to say:

"And then in 2010 we will have the NPT Review Conference. By the time that is held, we need the international community to be foursquare and united behind the global non-proliferation regime. We can't afford for that conference to be a fractured or fractious one: rather we must strengthen the NPT in all its aspects."

Towards the end of the speech, my right hon. Friend said:

"What we need is both vision—a scenario for a world free of nuclear weapons. And action—progressive steps to reduce warhead numbers and to limit the role of nuclear weapons in security policy. These two strands are separate but they are mutually reinforcing. Both are necessary, both at the moment too weak."

In the historical context, my right hon. Friend drew a parallel with people who have stood against impossible odds and achieved something. She cited the example of those who campaigned for the end of the slave trade and quoted William Wilberforce. She cited those who sought the millennium development goals to make poverty history in our society and in our world. Her words at that conference were prescient and important.

Nuclear weapons were used once in anger—in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. They were mere fireworks compared with the weapons that are now available in the world. Every year on 6 August, Hiroshima day, we have commemorations around the world—I always attend the one in Tavistock square in London—and every year we have aged Japanese guests who come along, who are dying of cancers, as others are dying of cancers, as a result of weapons used more than 60 years ago that are mere fireworks compared with what is now available. Those people are living the legacy of the only use of nuclear weapons. Hiroshima and Nagasaki have dedicated themselves as cities of peace. We should pay tribute to Mayor Ito of Nagasaki, who was tragically murdered earlier this year. He campaigned for peace on behalf of his city.

We came very near to nuclear war in 1962 in the Cuban missile crisis. We came very near to nuclear war between India and Pakistan in 2002. Is it really conscionable that in the 21st century, with all the problems of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, the AIDS pandemic and the lack of sanitation around the world, we should be thinking of spending billions of pounds on developing weapons of mass destruction? Why do we not accept in its totality the NPT that came into force in 1970, the reasons that we signed it and what it commits us to? Why do we not say that our intention, our purpose, is to bring about long-term nuclear disarmament and start by setting an example by saying that this country will not proceed any further with the development of a new generation of nuclear weapons? We could use that to encourage others.

The six-party talks have shown, in the case of North Korea, that it is possible to make progress. There are many people in this Room who would recognise that it is quite possible and, indeed, probable that progress will be made with Iran. If, however, we decide to go ahead with the new generation of nuclear weapons and the US, Russia, France and China do the same, who on earth are we to go to the NPT review conference in 2010 and proceed to lecture people in the rest of the world about why they should not develop nuclear weapons?

This, essentially, is a moral quest with a moral purpose. Millions out there would like to see a better world, as do many in here, and we do not believe that nuclear weapons bring about peace, justice or security. Instead, they bring about danger, the possibility of proliferation and, by their very manufacture and existence, the danger of pollution. The NPT was a seminal treaty, which was promoted by countries that did not have nuclear weapons, did not want them and did not want anybody else to have them. Although the PrepCom meeting in Vienna eventually concluded with a degree of harmony and good purpose, there is no guarantee that the review conference in 2010 will achieve the same, unless the UK, as one of the five declared nuclear weapon states, does all that it can to develop the process of nuclear disarmament. That is why I called for this debate, and I look forward to the contributions of others and to the Minister's reply. This is an issue for our time; it is one that will allow us to make a real contribution and bring about a more peaceful world.

10 am

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): In politics, timing is everything, so why on earth would Britain broadcast the message this year that it is time to ramp up the

nuclear weapons race? The Government have shown to our cost that, as I said earlier, they simply do not understand the dynamics of politics in the middle east and North Korea or *the evolving terrorist threats. The* awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons makes any decision that the Government take a historic one for this country and the world. We have the opportunity to set an example—good or bad—but I am afraid that Parliament has not truly debated or consulted on that decision in the wide manner that its importance demands.

Britain had a unique opportunity, as the bishops' conference put it, to jump start

"an approach to security and legitimate self-defence without the unconscionable threat of nuclear destruction"

and

"give a new impetus to the wider process towards total nuclear disarmament."

The question is whether we should trust the Prime Minister or have a proper, full debate on such a historic decision, rather than just pushing it through, with the Whips driving MPs through the voting Lobbies. All MPs worth their vote want eventual nuclear disarmament, which is our legal responsibility under the NPT. We signed up to that and we should follow through or explain why we will not. The answer to the question whether we should have a proper debate is, of course, a no-brainer, but MPs on both sides of the House were railroaded when the issue was discussed this spring.

Of course, the Government have a grave duty to maintain security, but the burning question is whether their, and indeed the Opposition's, strident push for even more destructive nuclear weapons platforms and capabilities would provide that security or facilitate less stable countries—some with desperate and dangerous leaders—in taking up the nuclear option. Do such weapons defend us against the evolving, asymmetric threats of terrorism? Mutually assured destruction—MAD—simply does not work as a deterrent against terrorist threats; we can ask any suicide bomber that and we will get a very clear answer.

We have seen a litany of disastrous weapons and major systems procurement decisions in the past decade, and overstretch in the conventional forces is certainly no illusion. Some MPs could therefore be forgiven for thinking that spending money on proven conventional forces would be a lot more effective way of creating a safer world and a safer Britain. The point, however, is that society needs to have a comprehensive debate, and it has not yet had one. Tony Blair said that the cost was about £20 billion over the relevant period, so pundits watching the issue would not be surprised if the cost escalated to £40 billion, given what we all know about cost estimates for major weapons, platforms and systems.

As I said, we could spend some of that money on conventional arms. We could also spend it on tackling climate change to help save the planet from certain and serious damage. Equally, we could spend it on international development to remove some of the inequalities around the world, which drive terrorism in the first place. Trident also raises key domestic questions, and there are serious domestic calls on the money involved—the health service, education and tackling law and order spring readily to mind.

MPs really can make a difference; we all know that, which is why we come here. However, we need the courage to put our country first, to put people before *politics and occasionally to ignore the party Whips and* do what we think is right so that we can force the Government to make good decisions, particularly when the matter is so historically important. I made a mistake believing and following the Government on Iraq, but I will not make that mistake so easily again.

Let me make it clear, however, that I am not advocating nuclear disarmament now, unlike the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), who made an excellent speech. I am not a disarmer by nature and I believe in strong defences. I am arguing that now is not the right time to make a decision; in fact, it is totally the wrong time. A decision is not necessary technically and the systems can be extended beyond 2020, when, if we want to look at a nuclear option for the future, there will be new, cheaper and more effective technologies that can be better targeted. There are also better ways to spend the money right now. We as MPs can send a historic message to the rest of the world and really make a difference if we have the courage to do what is right.

10.7 am

Mr. Dai Davies (Blaenau Gwent) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) not only on his speech but on the campaign that he has supported for many years to keep Trident and nuclear weapons on the political agenda.

My constituency boasts Michael Foot and Llew Smith as my predecessors, and they were unilateralists, who campaigned for unilateral nuclear disarmament for many years. I was a multilateralist until relatively recently, but what changed my mind primarily—other than the campaigns by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament—was the reduction of nuclear weapons across the world, including in Britain, Russia and America, as well as the existence of parts of the world without nuclear weapons. Now seems to be the time to take the next step.

The issue of a free vote has been mentioned. As an independent MP, I believe that the most important point is that all hon. Members must go out into their constituencies and listen to their constituents. Then, I would urge the Government to bring the issue back to Parliament and to give Parliament a free vote.

Many things have been said about Trident, nuclear power and nuclear weapons in the past months, including during election campaigns for deputy party leaders. Many Ministers have indicated that there should perhaps be a rethink, and they should be listened to. The most important thing is that we lead as a country to show that there is another way. We must use the disarming of Trident as a negotiating point with countries such as Iran to persuade them that disarmament is the right thing to do.

The Government held a debate that took a matter of hours, but this issue needs debating over a long time. CND has said that the move to renew does not have to be taken for six, seven, 10 and maybe 15 years, so let us have a debate. Let us not fail to talk about this issue for the sake of a matter of months.

The safeguard that nuclear weapons give is a false one. I have written many questions to Ministers asking under what conditions this country would use nuclear

[Mr. Dai Davies]

weapons, and only two answers have come back. The first is, "It is only a deterrent," but if that is the case, what is the point? The second is, "We'd only use it as a retaliatory measure." I am sorry, but it gives my constituents no pleasure to think that if 300,000 people were killed by a nuclear strike in this country we would feel better if we killed another 300,000 in another country. That, to me, is no reason for using nuclear weapons.

A point has been made about cost. Estimates from £20 billion to £100 billion have been made—unimaginable, unreachable sums of money. We talk about postcode lotteries for health service care, including cancer treatments. Flood defences, which are in the news at the moment, are among the things that the money could be much better spent on. I urge the Minister and the Government, and all hon. Members, to push for the Trident debate to come back to Parliament at the earliest opportunity, and to make sure that there is a free vote so that our consciences can lead the way.

10.10 am

Richard Younger-Ross (Teignbridge) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) on bringing the issue back to the House for debate, and particularly on the questions that he has posed for the Minister to answer. I hope that the Minister, whom I congratulate on her new post, will take up and answer some of the questions that have been put. We appreciate that perhaps subtle but important changes have occurred in the Government in the past few weeks; perhaps we shall receive answers to some of the questions that were not answered in the previous debate in the House.

A question that Members of Parliament are often asked is why they got involved in politics. Two issues in particular provoked me as a young child. One was the famine of 1962 or 1963 in India, and the second was the Cuban missiles crisis. In one case I could not understand how we in the west could be so rich and not help; in the second I could not understand how we in the west could be so mad that our system of defence was, as mentioned earlier, based on the principle of mutually assured destruction. I began to question at an early age the purpose of and need for nuclear weapons. It struck me that there was no moral argument for them. They were just a reaction—a fearful reaction—to the other side.

The politics that brought about the nuclear arsenals that were built up in the 1950s and 1960s has changed. However, the thinking of some of today's politicians does not appear to have moved on. I think in particular of one Conservative defence spokesman whose argument for maintaining the nuclear deterrent seemed to be that in the early 1980s it was good for hitting the left with, and was popular with voters; it was a policy that should be continued because he was convinced of its popularity with voters. That is virtually verbatim what he said—but I hasten to add that it was not the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), who will probably give us a slightly modified view. It struck me as a rather bizarre argument. Part of the difficulty is that many of the arguments for maintaining nuclear weapons are bizarre.

In relation to the current debate, Gorbachev said:

"A responsible course of action for the Government would be to postpone the decision on the future of the UK nuclear arsenal at least until the next review conference of the NPT in 2010".

That is an argument that we agree with. If hon. Members do not agree with or want to believe that source, they can always listen to Kofi Annan, who said:

"No state should imagine that, by pushing ahead with a nuclear weapon programme, it can pose as a defender of the NPT; still less that it will persuade others to disarm".

That is the argument that the Liberal Democrats have put, and the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) put a similar one. There is no need at this point for the House to have taken its decision to replace our nuclear deterrent.

The Liberal Democrats accept, in the current environment, that there is still the need for a minimum nuclear deterrent, but they also recognise what was particularly highlighted by the hon. Member for Islington, North—that we have legal obligations under the nuclear proliferation treaty to move forward to nuclear disarmament. Even the Government's own documents have cited the need for nuclear disarmament, although that seems to be contradicted by their actions and other statements.

I want to return to previous debates and some questions that were put to the former Prime Minister. In December he said that under article VI of the NPT

"we can maintain our independent nuclear deterrent. We are under an obligation, which we are fulfilling, to pursue multilateral negotiations, but there is no obligation on us to disarm unilaterally."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2006; Vol. 454, c. 26.]

He also stated:

"The evidence is that the non-proliferation treaty works best in circumstances in which there is a multilateral mood for disarmament. That is the reason why we believe it is better to pursue such a course under the terms of that treaty."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2006; Vol. 454, c. 35.]

He indicated that the deterrent is best achieved by co-operation with other states. Perhaps the Minister could explain how, in advance of 2010, the Government intend to promote effective and committed co-operation with their NPT partners.

In December the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes), who is the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, asked the then Prime Minister to

"confirm that the Government remain committed to the goal of global nuclear disarmament and will make renewed efforts to secure international negotiations as called for under article VI of the non-proliferation treaty".—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2006; Vol. 454, c. 32.]

The Prime Minister refused to confirm that. He talked of unilateral disarmament, but not of the need to make renewed efforts on the international stage. Will the Minister advise us of the efforts that the present Government intend to make to promote the NPT, and what negotiations they will enter into with other countries, to bring that about?

We accept that there are difficulties over international peace; there are concerns about Iran's intentions and about North Korea and its intentions. However, we must ask what is the best way forward. Is it to say that we will go ahead willy-nilly with the replacement of the Trident system? Is it not better to be more thoughtful and send out a message that we believe that we still have the right to a minimum nuclear deterrent, but that we recognise that we have obligations under the NPT which require us to try to move forward with multilateral

disarmament, and which we will honour by making a commitment to reduce our nuclear defence capacity by 50 per cent., with a view to obtaining further negotiations with the other relevant countries and creating a situation *in which Iran can be engaged in a non-proliferation* treaty and North Korea can feel assured that there is movement towards that? We could then move on to consider other countries that have developed nuclear weapons, and what can be done to reduce the absolute risk of a nuclear conflict.

We should not doubt that such a conflict is a possibility. In the conflict between Pakistan and India a year or so ago, both those countries came perilously close to a nuclear exchange. That would have been a disaster.

10.19 am

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing the debate. He has long had an utterly consistent approach to these matters, and it will not surprise him that he and I disagree on one or two significant points. He has kept his CND badge polished and on public display even in recent years when it has become somewhat unfashionable among leading members of his party to advertise one's previous membership of that organisation. He is right to point out the importance of this topic.

The non-proliferation treaty represented a bargain in which the non-nuclear states agreed not to acquire nuclear weapons, and to put their civil nuclear programmes under international safeguards. The nuclear states agreed to take action to prevent proliferation, to pursue disarmament negotiations, under article VI, and to allow the easy dissemination of civil nuclear technology. Any assessment of the NPT has to take all sides of that bargain into account.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Islington, North that the UK should give up its nuclear deterrent. Neither do I agree that there is a comfortable way out of taking the difficult decision whether to renew Trident by postponing it. The Minister will have chapter and verse, but my clear memory of our debate earlier this Session on the renewal of Trident is that all the expert advice from defence chiefs and others was that the lead-in time for the development of a renewed Trident system meant that the decision had to be taken this Parliament if we were to be in a position to renew the deterrent when the current Trident system is likely to become obsolete. For those reasons, I differ from both the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Richard Younger-Ross), and my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink).

It is a pity that earlier speakers did not mention that the UK has reduced its nuclear arsenal by 70 per cent. since the end of the cold war, or that we are the only one of the original five nuclear powers to have limited ourselves to a single delivery system. The US, Russia, China and France have maintained more than one such system.

Bob Spink: Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that we have not become less secure as a result of reducing our nuclear weaponry and launch systems? Does he not, therefore, see any illogicality in his argument? The Opposition have a debate in the main Chamber this afternoon on reducing global poverty; does he not think that some of the £20 billion that we are to spend on ramping up our nuclear systems would be better spent on reducing global poverty, as it is global poverty *and inequality that are driving terrorist growth*?

Mr. Lidington: The growth of terrorism derives from several factors. My hon. Friend might be right to attribute it, in part, to global poverty, and I do not seek to deny the importance of taking national and international action to address that. He knows that our right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is in Africa this week, highlighting the importance of international development and our party's commitment to acting to improve the lot of people in the poorest countries. However, any responsible Government, and any party aspiring to government in this country, have to keep at the forefront of their mind their prime duty of looking after the security of the UK population, both nationally and internationally. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the remarks of the Bishop of Rochester a few months ago, when he acknowledged that the

"cost of replacing or renewing Trident is often cited as a reason for not doing so."

He also acknowledged that that money could be spent on

"international development or environmental projects",

but concluded that

"the cost of Trident is very small compared to the UK's GDP and is a small price to pay for the security on which many other social goods depend."

Jeremy Corbyn: I hesitate to disagree with a bishop, but something has to be said here. Is not the argument that he has put, which the hon. Gentleman is also putting, one for every country in the world to develop nuclear weapons? Are we made more secure by having nuclear weapons? Is Sweden made more secure by not having them? Surely that is the question that has to be answered.

Mr. Lidington: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's case is that he sidesteps the fact that the NPT acknowledged that some states were in possession of nuclear weapons, and sought to create a framework under which those states could combat proliferation and work, over time—no deadline was specified in article VI—to reduce their nuclear arsenals and the threat of nuclear war. The treaty also acknowledged that other states did not possess nuclear weapons. All signatories undertook duties to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, but the treaty accepted the reality that they were possessed by existing nuclear states and sought to stabilise that position. I have heard no persuasive argument that the UK's unilateral disarmament would discourage nuclear proliferation by others. The NPT system has worked pretty well on the whole. In fairness, the hon. Member for Islington, North made some of these points in his speech. South Africa voluntarily gave up its potential nuclear capability, and the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus gave up stocks of nuclear weapons that they had in their territories.

The Government need to mount vigorous diplomatic action regarding the weaknesses in the current non-proliferation regime. In today's world, we face new, and probably growing, dangers from nuclear proliferation,

[Mr. Lidington]

partly because access to nuclear technology is a lot easier now and partly because it has been around for about half a century and is more familiar to people and organisations than was the case even before the internet made it possible for complex, advanced technology to be transmitted from continent to continent at the click of a mouse. We have also seen the growth of a vigorous black market in nuclear technology in recent years. The Minister will know that A. Q. Khan's group in Pakistan is believed to have sold nuclear know-how to Iraq, North Korea and Libya. We have also seen, through the examples of Iran and Libya, that countries have been able to conceal nuclear programmes successfully not just for months or years, but for decades.

The Government should press for international action to strengthen the safeguards in the treaty against nuclear proliferation. For a start, countries will be less likely to conceal what they are doing if their programmes are likely to be detected, so we must beef up the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectorate.

There are only about 650 inspectors, whose job it is to police 900 or so nuclear facilities worldwide. By way of analogy, I should point out that Disney World employs more than 1,000 people on security duties for one site. The Government need to consider some serious questions. Is the number of inspectors large enough? Is the IAEA budget of $120 million a year adequate in the face of the growing threat of proliferation? If it is not, what action do they intend to take to bring together their international partners to strengthen the arm of the inspectors?

Secondly, as the hon. Member for Islington, North said, we need to have regard to the importance of the additional supplementary protocols to the NPT. I gather that, so far, only 69 countries have both signed up to such additional protocols and, crucially, brought them into force. The protocols give additional rights of inspection to the IAEA, and there is now a strong case for international agreement to try to make additional protocols the norm for all signatories to the NPT.

We do not have time today to go into the Iranian political and diplomatic situation in detail. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is clear that Iran is no longer implementing the supplementary protocol that it had agreed. The additional protocols do not give the inspectorate the authority to explore some serious matters such as high-explosives testing or the design of missile warheads. In cases such as that of Iran, we need to have a system of additional obligations approved by the Security Council that can be imposed on countries that renege on the supplementary protocols that they have previously agreed to implement.

The North Korean case exposed another possible loophole in the NPT. North Korea was able to build up its civil nuclear programme, give the required three months' notice of withdrawal from the NPT and then move rapidly towards a weapons programme because it had acquired the knowledge of all the sensitive parts of the nuclear fuel cycle. If we are to address that problem in the current treaty framework, we also need to address the clear obligation in the treaty for the developed countries, in particular the nuclear weapons states, to facilitate the transfer of peaceful, civil nuclear technology to other countries that have agreed not to go down the path of developing nuclear weapons programmes of their own.

I fully understand the wish of many countries in the developing world to develop their own civil nuclear programmes. There is a duty on the existing nuclear weapons powers to live up to the expectation of the treaty that everything possible would be done to facilitate the transfer of civil nuclear technology. That could be achieved in various ways: there could be some kind of international partnership whereby a small number of states produce nuclear fuel that could then be made available to others; or there could be a network of fuel banks managed and policed on an international basis. That might enable us both to meet the developing countries' need for nuclear energy and to prevent countries such as North Korea from getting access to the sensitive parts of the nuclear fuel cycle that might make possible the rapid development of a weapons programme in the future.

Finally, I hope that the Minister will say something about the Government's approach to the black market in nuclear technology and nuclear weapons. United Nations resolution 1540 calls on every member state to criminalise proliferation action of that type. There is a need for even better intelligence co-operation against proliferation than is in place and for tighter controls on existing stockpiles.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman be able to say anything about his party's position on the expiry of the strategic arms reduction treaty in 2009 and the danger that between then and the NPT conference there could be the development of a new arms race between Russia and the United States?

Mr. Lidington: I hope that the British Government will do everything possible to try to prevent the development of such an arms race. A new arms race between Russia and the US is in the interests of neither of those countries, nor is it in the interests of world peace. I hope that the recent contacts between the US and the Russian Government about the controversial issue of the anti-missile system lead to an agreement that will defuse the risk of such an arms race.

The NPT and its associated system of controls has, on the whole, served the world well. I hope that the Government will be prepared to acknowledge that in the new situation, given the growing risk of proliferation that we now face, further action is needed to strengthen the existing safeguards. That represents a way forward that is in the interests of the security of the United Kingdom and of international peace.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Meg Munn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing this debate. I thank him and other hon. Members for their kind words of welcome. Many thoughtful and considered contributions were made and we heard many sincerely held views. I shall do my best to respond to all of the many points that have been made. I ask hon. Members to bear with me and wait until I have got well into my speech before attempting to intervene if they fear that I am not going to respond to a particular point. I shall happily take interventions at that stage.

From the Government's perspective the timing of the debate could not be better, because, as has been mentioned by several hon. Members, just a month ago the then Foreign Secretary spoke to the Carnegie international non-proliferation conference in Washington to call for a renewed commitment to a world free from nuclear weapons. She received a standing ovation for her speech—my aspirations this morning are somewhat lower, none the less I shall refer to the plan that she set out. The Carnegie speech set out how we as a Government want to reinvigorate the international approach to nuclear disarmament, with the explicit goal of reinforcing the NPT process in the run-up to the review conference in 2010, to which several hon. Members have referred.

I believe that the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said that the UK has an exceptional record in meeting our NPT disarmament commitments, and we should be clear about that. What are those commitments? Article VI imposes an obligation on all states to pursue in good faith negotiations on effective measures for cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date, on nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament. The NPT review conference in 2000 agreed by consensus 13 practical steps towards implementation of article VI. The UK remains committed to those steps and is making progress on them.

We are disarming. The House heard in March of our decision to reduce the UK's stockpile of operationally available warheads by a further 20 per cent. to less than 160. Significant as that is, it is just the latest in a series of dramatic reductions in the UK's nuclear weapons. Since the end of the cold war, the explosive power of UK nuclear weapons will have been reduced by 75 per cent. UK nuclear weapons account for less than 1 per cent. of the global inventory.

We have withdrawn and dismantled our tactical marine and airborne nuclear capabilities and, consequently, have reduced our reliance on nuclear weapons to one system: submarine-based Trident. As hon. Members have said, we are the only nuclear-weapons state to have done that. We have also reduced the readiness of the remaining nuclear force. We now have only one boat on patrol at any one time and it carries no more than 48 warheads. We have not conducted a nuclear test explosion since 1991, and we have signed and ratified the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. We have ceased production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. We have also increased transparency of our fissile material holdings, and we have produced historical records of our defence holdings of both plutonium and highly enriched uranium.

Our decision to renew the Trident system did not reverse or undermine any of those positive disarmament steps. The UK is not upgrading the capabilities of the system, and there is no move to produce more useable weapons and no change in our nuclear posture or doctrine. The UK's nuclear weapons are not designed for military use during conflicts. They are a strategic deterrent that we would contemplate using only in extreme circumstances of self-defence. Over the past 50 years, the deterrent has been used only to deter acts of aggression against our vital interests, never to coerce others. I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), because we are not ramping up our weapons.

Hon. Members referred to timing and whether we needed to make a decision now. The issue was debated at length during the Trident debate, so I do not intend to go into it in great detail today. My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett) the then Foreign Secretary, said specifically that it would mean a decision to begin a process to design, build and commission submarines to replace the existing Vanguard class boats. That will take some 17 years, so the decision was necessary. It was discussed at great length, and it was appropriate to make it. I shall speak about the cost in a moment.

Bob Spink: If replacing Trident will not increase our capability, why are we doing it?

Meg Munn: Because we are maintaining the existing situation while reducing the number of warheads. Renewal is simply about maintaining the minimum nuclear capability necessary for our security, while we continue to pursue in good faith the conditions for a world free from nuclear weapons. The simple truth is that the UK is implementing its obligations under the NPT, while those states that are developing illicit nuclear weapons programmes are not.

A number of hon. Members referred to cost. The average annual procurement cost represents less than 0.1 per cent. of gross domestic product, and we believe that that price is worth paying to maintain our capability. Since coming to power, the Government have increased investment in many of our public services and elsewhere, so this is not something that should be offset against this matter. Our annual expenditure on capital and running costs of the Trident nuclear deterrent, including the cost of the Atomic Weapons Establishment, from its entry into service in 1994-95 to 2004-05 is in the range of 3 to 4 per cent. of the defence budget.

The UK is not the only nuclear weapons state to have been disarming. We have welcomed the series of bilateral agreements since the end of the cold war that have greatly reduced the major nuclear arsenals. By the end of this year, the US will have fewer than half the number of silo-based nuclear missiles that it had in 1990. By 2012, US operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads will be reduced to about one third of 2001 levels. Under the terms of the strategic offensive reductions treaty, Russia is making parallel cuts. The French have withdrawn four complete weapons systems.

Last year, Kofi Annan said that the world risks becoming mired in a sterile stand-off between those who care most about disarmament, and those who care most about proliferation. He was right. The dangers of such mutually assured paralysis are dangers for us all. Any solution must be a dual one, with movement on both proliferation and disarmament—a revitalisation of the grand bargain that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North set out so well at the beginning of his speech, and which was struck in 1968, when the non-proliferation treaty was established.

Today the non-proliferation regime is under pressure, as a number of hon. Members said. We have seen the emergence of a mixture of further declared and undeclared nuclear powers, and two more countries—Iran and North Korea, which are both signatories to the NPT—present further challenges to the international community.

[Meg Munn]

Their actions have profound and direct implications for global security, and raise the serious prospect of proliferation across their region.

The Government welcome Iran's discussions with the International Atomic Energy Association about resolving outstanding safeguarding issues, and we hope for rapid progress. Iran's suspension of all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities required by UN Security Council resolution remains crucial to restoring international confidence in Iran's nuclear intentions. It is not complying with that requirement and that is why we are discussing a possible sanctions resolution with our E3 plus three partners. As the UN Security Council has repeatedly made clear, if Iran meets the requirements for a suspension, that will open the way to negotiation with the E3 plus three about a mutually acceptable long-term arrangement. We are working hard to ensure that the matter is taken seriously.

We are not party to the six-party talks process, but we welcome the recent progress and sincerely hope that there will be further progress.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Minister is talking about NPT signatories, but will she say what strategy the Government intend to pursue to try to persuade India and Pakistan to become signatories to the treaty, and explain the situation in Israel, which I understand now has more than 200 warheads, rather more than there are in this country? That is clearly a factor, but not the only one, in the middle east region.

Meg Munn: As my hon. Friend is probably aware, the Government want universalisation of the NPT, and we want everyone to sign up to it. I shall refer to our general approach in trying to reinvigorate the process later in my speech.

Our efforts on non-proliferation will be dangerously undermined if others believe, however unfairly, that the terms of the grand bargain have changed, so we must do more than just have an exemplary record on disarmament to date. As my right hon. Friend the former Foreign Secretary made clear in her speech in Washington, we need a renewed commitment to a world free from nuclear weapons, and a convincing plan. The point is not to convince the Iranians or the North Koreans and I do not believe for a second that further reductions in our nuclear weapons would have a material effect on their nuclear ambitions. The reason for doing more is that the moderate majority of states—our natural and vital allies on non-proliferation—want us to do more, and if we do not do so, we risk helping Iran and North Korea in their efforts to muddy the water and to turn the blame for their own nuclear intransigence back on us.

I shall deal with the point that the hon. Member for Castle Point made about terrorism. International terrorism is a serious and sustained threat, and we must do everything we can to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with it. However, it is not a matter of choice; we do not have to—nor should we—choose between addressing terrorist threats and nuclear threats, and we cannot choose between dealing either with those threats or with the challenges of climate change. We have to deal with all of them, and we will continue to do so.

The Government are committed to an effective IAEA. We do not accept that it has insufficient resources to carry out its responsibility, and we will continue to make significant voluntary contributions to it to ensure that we provide it with appropriate support. This year's settlement provided a real increase to the budget of 1.4 per cent.

Richard Younger-Ross: The Minister mentioned making progress with the NPT, and that we have only one system—Trident. The Government document on the issue said:

"We are the only nuclear power that has so far been prepared to take such an important step"—

having just one weapons-based system—

"on the route to nuclear disarmament."

If the Minister says that she is in favour of progressing the NPT, and the Government document says that they are in favour of further nuclear disarmament, are any of the weapons systems that we want to replace up for negotiation?

Meg Munn: We have set out our replacement for the Trident system and design. That is what we are discussing. Our position is that disarmament should be multilateral, and I shall come on both to address what we consider to be the important next steps and to respond to the hon. Gentleman's questions about our plans moving towards 2010.

Let me just outline the key components. First, we will continue to call for significant further reductions in the major Russian and US nuclear arsenals. We hope that the existing bilateral treaties will be succeeded by further clear commitments to significantly lower warhead numbers, including tactical as well as strategic nuclear weapons. We are clear that when it becomes useful to include in any negotiations the 1 per cent. of the world's nuclear weapons that belong to the UK, we will willingly do so.

Secondly, we must press on with the comprehensive test ban treaty and with the fissile material cut-off treaty. Both treaties limit in real and practical ways the ability of states that are party to them to develop new weapons and expand their nuclear capabilities. The treaties play a very powerful symbolic role, too, signalling to the rest of the world that the race for more and bigger weapons is over, and that the direction from now on will be down not up. In other words, they are exactly the sort of

"effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race"

that article 6 requires us to negotiate. That is why we are so keen for those countries that have not yet done so to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty, and why we continue to work hard for the start of negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty in Geneva.

Thirdly, we should begin now to build deeper relationships on disarmament between nuclear weapon states. For the UK's part, we have made it clear that we are ready and willing to engage with other members of the P5 on transparency and confidence-building measures.

Finally, we have also announced a series of unilateral activities that the UK will undertake as a "disarmament laboratory". We will participate in a new project by the International Institute for Strategic Studies on the practical steps required for the elimination of nuclear weapons,

and we will undertake further detailed work at the UK's Atomic Weapons Establishment on the nuts and bolts of nuclear disarmament. That work will examine three discrete issues related to the verification of disarmament, the authentication of warheads, chain of custody problems in sensitive nuclear weapons facilities, and monitored storage of dismantled nuclear weapons.

I shall now deal with the other points that Members have raised. We are committed to all the NPT's three pillars: disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful use of nuclear power. The former Foreign Secretary set out that commitment very clearly in her speech in Washington, and if Members have not read it, I commend it to them. The UK is showing leadership. We are taking forward the practical work that I have just outlined, and we are working with EU partners on proposals to make withdrawal from the NPT more difficult. It is crucial for international security that states cannot just walk away and develop nuclear weapons. We are also working with Germany and the Netherlands on a uranium bond proposal that would offer countries wishing to develop their own civil nuclear industries guaranteed supplies of nuclear fuel in return for agreed safeguards.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North raised the issue of Mordechai Vanunu. My hon. Friend will appreciate that we are talking about an Israeli citizen in Israel. However, I can assure him that during Mr. Vanunu's detention and subsequent to his release, we have raised the issue of the restrictions on him with the Israeli authorities.

In article six, there are two key words: "good faith". The UK's record is one of good-faith disarmament. That is why we are recognised as the most forward-leaning nuclear weapons state. I have described today our determination to reinvigorate the global approach to nuclear disarmament, and the practical steps that we are taking to help achieve a world free from nuclear weapons. It should be clear that this Government are acting, and will continue to act, in the utmost good faith in fulfilling our disarmament obligations under the non-proliferation treaty.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Saudi Arabia

11 am

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to debate Anglo-Saudi relations under your chairmanship, Miss Begg. Before I start, I should state that I am a member of the all-party group on Saudi Arabia. I am pleased to see that our chairman, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan), found the time to attend the debate, and I welcome him.

There are 20,000 British citizens living and working in Saudi Arabia, which is by far our largest export market in the middle east. The Saudi royal family have close contact with our own. I am pleased that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office acknowledged the country's importance, and that quite a number of Ministers have visited Riyadh during the past few years.

I have studied the middle east during the two years that I have been an MP, and I have been increasingly interested in Saudi Arabia's role in that part of the world. I thank Prince Sultan al-Saud, the head of the political desk at the Saudi embassy, and His Highness Prince Mohammed, the ambassador, whom I have met on a number of occasions. They are great representatives of their country and do a tremendous job here in London. I thank them for that and for the assistance that they have given me.

Saudi Arabia is a key strategic ally, and one that is growing in influence. It has displaced the United States as well as the historical Arab diplomatic heavyweight, Egypt, as the regional power broker in the middle east. For example, at the 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut, the Saudis first proposed their peace plan for the Israel-Palestine conflict and managed to secure the support of the other Arab League members in that extremely important initiative. I shall discuss it later, but needless to say, it offers recognition and peace to Israel if it withdraws back to its pre-1967 borders.

The Saudis have also been involved in trying to bring Hamas and Fatah together in Palestine, applying pressure to get those two increasingly conflicting and hostile groups to work with one another to ensure peace in the Gaza strip and throughout Palestine. Saudi Arabia has also tried to create peace between the Sunnis and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

It is not well known that the Saudi king, Abdullah, has been instrumental in trying to convince the President of Sudan to accept a multinational force in Darfur. That is encouraging. As the Minister will know, in the '70s, '80s and even the early '90s, Saudi Arabia was not a big diplomatic player, tending to focus instead on domestic politics. Considering all the incredibly important initiatives that it is pursuing, not just near its borders but in other countries throughout the middle east, it is clear that it is playing an increasing role in negotiations and diplomacy. Saudi Arabia is a moderate, stable ally of the UK and a key strategic influence that we must cultivate.

I thank the Foreign Office—I do not normally go out of my way to do so—for its initiative on one issue. The United Kingdom is the first Christian country to organise an official Hajj delegation to assist the 20,000 British Muslims who go to Mecca every year. FCO staff have met members of the Muslim community at the Islamic centre in Regent's park.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am glad that my hon. Friend touched on the issue of religion. Does he share my concern that Saudi Arabia, mostly through the religious police, continues to repress religious minorities, not least Christians? They are mostly expatriate Christians, but also Saudis who have converted to Christianity from Islam. Is he aware that under Saudi law, people can be put to death for changing their views, minds and hearts about what religion to follow? If they leave Islam to convert to Christianity, or any other religion for that matter, they can be put to death. Will he condemn that policy?

Daniel Kawczynski: I was rather hoping to concentrate on the positive side of our relations with Saudi Arabia. My hon. Friend has thrown me something of a googly, but I thank him for his intervention. Of course we regret persecution of Christians anywhere in the world. I know that the FCO does its utmost in many countries to voice concerns where there is systematic persecution of Christians.

Mark Pritchard: I did not wish to throw my hon. Friend a googly—I was hoping that it would be a straight ball, which he usually hits to the boundary for a six—but it was a serious point. Last year, four east African Christians were detained for more than a month in very poor conditions and then deported, which has caused severe hardship to their families, as they were in Saudi Arabia raising money to send back home. Does not an inconsistency lie at the heart of the Saudi Government? Whether in Kosovo or elsewhere, they fund the building of mosques throughout Europe, where we allow religious freedom, but they will not allow even small groups to meet for Christian worship in Saudi Arabia.

Daniel Kawczynski: If my hon. Friend has any examples of people being persecuted because of their Christian faith, I shall be happy to discuss them on his behalf with His Highness Prince Sultan at the embassy.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): It is right and proper to raise the question of persecution in Saudi Arabia or anywhere else, but I point out that Saudi Arabia is a young and growing democracy. This country, a long-standing democracy, has persecuted people because of religion—we need look no further than Northern Ireland.

Daniel Kawczynski: I concur totally. It is true that we in the west like to think our values and codes are relevant throughout the world, but we must understand that different countries operate differently, and their societies are at different levels of development. We cannot compare them with us according to our western values and principles.

Mark Pritchard: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Daniel Kawczynski: If he will allow me, I shall give way in a moment. The Foreign Office meets the Muslim community at the Islamic centre in Regent's park, the Saudi ambassador attends and the FCO provides tremendous help in sorting out the logistics of ensuring that 20,000 British Muslims have a safe and secure trip to Mecca. I thank the Foreign Office for that work.

To turn briefly to the defence industry, we owe a great debt of gratitude to the Saudis for entrusting us with their security. Over the years, they have spent a great deal of money purchasing British defence machinery. Tens of thousands of British jobs depend on those exports. We have secured exports worth billions of pounds to this country.

Margaret Thatcher, the then Conservative Prime Minister—I have to put in a plug for her—did a tremendous job in the '80s on securing those contracts, as did her Ministers. I am pleased to see that the Labour Administration have continued such important negotiations in trying to secure further contracts. In June, I believe, the Secretary of State for Defence went to Saudi Arabia to discuss a contract for 72 Eurofighter Typhoon jets. I should be grateful if the Minister gave me an update on how those negotiations are going. The contract is worth billions of pounds; securing the sale of those 72 Typhoon jets would be a tremendous boost to our economy.

I shall come to our other opportunities with Saudi Arabia, but I should first say that the Prime Minister should appoint a special trade envoy to the kingdom. He has appointed quite a few envoys recently; there is even an envoy for forests, the hon. Member for Brent, North (Barry Gardiner), whom I saw speaking in this Chamber the other day.

Why should the Prime Minister appoint an envoy to Saudi Arabia? Well, he has appointed an outsider, now Lord Jones of Birmingham, as global trade envoy. One can generally be pleased with that appointment, although I have some issues with the individual. The general concept of having somebody from outside in such a position is a good one. We need a special envoy to Saudi Arabia because of its huge size and the huge potential of our contracts with it. We need an outside expert who knows Saudi Arabia extremely well; who knows the culture and has a long-established network in the country.

Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has referred to Comrade Jones, as we know him, who is doing a wonderful job for us. The hon. Gentleman has also mentioned cultural links, and it is important that we recognise their effect on jobs. Will he also mention sporting links? The Saudi people have a great love of horse racing and football.

Daniel Kawczynski: I gave way to the hon. Gentleman because he is one of the very few socialists whom I genuinely like—*[Laughter.]*

Mr. Devine: Miss Begg, can that be struck from the record?

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Saudi Arabians participate greatly in horse racing in our country. They are also becoming better at football; I wish them every success in the World cup. We look forward to their continuing sporting links with our country.

I come back to my point, which I make seriously to the Minister. If the Prime Minister is to start appointing outsiders as envoys, he should please consider having a special envoy—if not to Saudi Arabia, then at least to the middle east. Such a person could be responsible for nurturing trade with those vital countries.

I take the Minister back to 1990, when we first saw tremendous co-operation from Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf war. She showed herself to be a great beacon of stability and hosted tens of thousands of our troops on her territory. That was not easy to sell domestically, given the nature of the country, yet she realised at the time the importance of standing shoulder to shoulder with Britain, following the United Nations Security Council resolutions and making sure that Saddam Hussein was expelled from Kuwait.

Mark Pritchard: My hon. Friend has mentioned Saudis on Saudi soil, and obviously that is logical. As a fellow Shropshire Member of Parliament, may I ask him whether he is aware of Saudis on Shropshire soil? Some 40 or 50 Saudi nationals are training at the Defence College of Aeronautical Engineering at RAF Cosford in my constituency in the county of Shropshire. Does he join me in welcoming those people to Shropshire and hoping that that trade and exchange will continue?

Daniel Kawczynski: I wholeheartedly support my hon. Friend's statement. What he has mentioned is another example of how much the Saudi Arabians entrust us with the training of their pilots in the defence industry.

The Saudis not only hosted us in 1990 but participated with the allied troops in liberating Kuwait. However, if we move 13 years forward to the second Gulf war of 2003, we see a slightly different situation. Having spoken to my Saudi friends, I know that Saudi Arabia warned against the invasion. They lobbied heavily and extensively. They warned the allies not to invade Iraq as they felt that it would lead to certain problems down the line. Being local experts and knowing the area as they do, they also suggested that we, having taken over the country and occupied it in March-April 2003, should keep some of the principal state apparatus intact to manage the society and country effectively.

That, of course, was not done—primarily because the Americans wished to start anew. I regret that, and feel that Saudi Arabia should not have been sidelined. Her advice should have been clearly taken on, both in the run-up to the war and following the subsequent occupation. We could have avoided many problems if we had listened more carefully to our Saudi allies before, during and after the invasion.

The invasion has left our friends, the Saudis, with a tremendous headache, as they now neighbour such a volatile and unstable country. The Minister will know that Saudi Arabia's border with Iraq is longer than 900 miles. The Saudis have spent tens and tens of millions of pounds on constructing what is in effect a Berlin wall on that frontier and trying to police those hundreds of miles of desert with barbed wire fences and radar to stop the insurgents from coming across the boundary and infiltrating Saudi Arabia.

A critical advancement of Anglo-Saudi relations is our understanding of their peace plan for the Palestine-Israeli conflict, on which I want to focus with the Minister. As I said, in Beirut in 2002, the Saudi Arabians put to the Arab League their peace initiative for Palestine and Israel. Five years later, at the Arab League Riyadh summit of 2007, Saudi Arabia again managed to get the league to reaffirm its commitment to the peace plan. It is extremely important that the plan should be debated and implemented; extremist Muslim organisations such as Hamas will only continue to get stronger unless the terrible tragedy is rectified.

The Saudi proposal would give Israel peace and recognition if she withdrew to her '67 borders. It calls for an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Let us pause for a moment and think about that—it is extraordinary that a country such as Saudi Arabia, together with her Arab partners, should come forward with a plan so revolutionary and imaginative as to say, "If you withdraw to your pre-'67 borders, we—all of us in the Arab world—will guarantee you recognition and give you peace."

For me, that is breathtaking and something that our Parliament here in Britain should deliberate on and discuss far more extensively. The Saudi peace plan is so inspiring. If we are to have peace in Palestine, we need to ensure that the Arab League supports it and that it is in favour of the initiatives that we take.

Mark Pritchard *rose—*

Daniel Kawczynski: I shall give way in a second.

The peace plan is extraordinary. It goes on to say that there has to be an agreed and just solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees. The Saudis say that we must recognise the injustices that have been perpetrated on the Palestinian refugees. What are the options for those refugees, if we go back to the pre-1967 borders? Some may return to their lands; others may wish to seek compensation. An international committee will have to deal with that compensation—perhaps there could be funding from international bodies such as the UN, who knows? The other alternative is that some refugees will simply not go back. They have made their homes all around the world, in Europe and north America. They may not go back to their lands. However, a vital part of the peace initiative is justice for the Palestinian refugees. I cannot emphasise enough my thinking that that initiative should be taken forward.

Our former Prime Minister, Mr. Blair, is heading the Quartet's look at the peace initiative, representing the US, Russia, the EU and the UN. I hope that Mr. Blair will attend the next meeting of the Arab League, and I shall be writing to him to ask him to do so. I hope that he will listen to the Arab League about the peace initiative. My understanding—the Minister may correct me if I am wrong—is that no British Prime Minister has ever attended the Arab League, yet it will invite any international statesman who wishes to attend. Recently, the Norwegian Prime Minister attended a meeting. Our former Prime Minister should attend the Arab League meeting, listen to the peace initiative and show that he is willing to take on its views. I will give way to my hon. Friend; I am being generous with him, as always.

Mark Pritchard: I thank my hon. Friend; I was about to say the same thing, before he mentioned it. On the issue of the wider Arab countries, does he agree that the stability of the region as a whole, including the Palestinian territory and Lebanon, would be better served and helped if those Arab countries financed the building of schools, hospitals and infrastructure rather than financing the army and equipping militia groups and terrorist organisations?

Daniel Kawczynski: I concur that it would be interesting to know—we should try to find out more about this—how much money the Arab League gives to educational projects in areas of conflict such as Palestine. We in the European Union, and particularly in Britain, play our part in financing Palestine and the Gaza strip and in giving development aid to that territory. We have to do everything possible to ensure that the Arab League and wealthy states, such as Saudi Arabia, play their part in financing vital educational and humanitarian projects in those areas of conflict. I agree totally with my hon. Friend.

I want to talk now about how Saudi Arabia is fighting the war on terror. In April 2007, Saudi Arabia announced the arrest of 172 suspected terrorists. The Interior Ministry said that detainees had reached

"an advance stage of readiness and what remained only was to set the zero hour for their attacks".

In this country, we have recently had to make a number of arrests, regrettably, due to the increasing threat to our security. When people are arrested on suspicion of terrorism, it receives a great deal of media attention and coverage. It is difficult to imagine having to arrest 172 suspected terrorists. Many terrorists are infiltrating Saudi Arabia who have been trained in Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts of the world. Saudi Arabia is facing a hugely difficult situation in trying to cope and grapple with that. Ultimately, as we all know, it has been ramped up since May 2003 following our invasion of Iraq.

According to official figures, about 144 foreigners and Saudis, including security personnel, and 120 militants have died in attacks and clashes with police since May 2003. Those are significant figures, as the Minister will acknowledge. In May 2003, al-Qaeda suicide bombers hit western housing compounds in Riyadh. In May 2004, 22 people, including an American, a Briton and an Italian, died in an attack on an oil company and housing compounds in al-Khobar. Days later, gunmen killed Simon Cumbers, an Irish cameraman working for the BBC, and seriously wounded his British colleague, Frank Gardner, as they filmed in Riyadh.

I have it on good authority from my contacts in Saudi Arabia that over the past five years they have foiled 180 separate plots of insurgency within their country. No one can doubt the Saudi Arabians' effort in tackling international terrorism. The Minister knows, far better than I do, the help that our country gets from intelligence from Saudi Arabia. He knows, far better than me, a mere Back Bencher, what happens in the communication between Saudi Arabia and our security forces. I would bet my bottom dollar that the help that we are getting from Saudi Arabia to deal with insurgency and terrorism internationally is phenomenal. I am convinced of that. We owe a debt of gratitude to our allies, who show so much confidence in us and are prepared to share so much with us to enable us to deal with the increasing threat of terrorism.

I come now to the Gulf, which is a hugely important territory of water, and, in particular, to the strait of Hormuz. As the Minister knows, that strait is pivotal in securing oil supplies not only for us but for the entire world. Saudi Arabia's eastern fleet patrols that part of the world. Up until now, France and the United States have been leading the way in supplying Saudi Arabia with all the necessary vessels for its eastern fleet. We must do everything possible to provide Saudi Arabia with British ships for that fleet. We have the best naval vessels in the world, far superior to those of the French and the Americans, so we should be saying loudly to the Saudi Arabians, "Buy British. Buy your vessels for your eastern fleet from the United Kingdom."

In March 2007, *Jane's Defence Weekly* stated that the royal Saudi naval force had an interest in type 45 air defence destroyers. According to that journal, between two and four ships could be purchased. That would realise, for us, up to £2.5 billion, providing a great many more jobs and more investment in our country. I would be grateful if the Minister could give me an update on that, and assure me that everything is being done to ensure that Saudi Arabia seriously considers British naval capabilities for modernising, upgrading and expanding her eastern fleet, which will inevitably do a great amount to help us safeguard the future and safety of the strait of Hormuz.

The Minister will be pleased to hear that I am nearing the end of my speech, but I come briefly to the domestic front. Regrettably, I must say the most controversial thing that I shall say—even I have to be controversial at times. I am absolutely appalled by the honour of a knighthood to Salman Rushdie, and I believe that it should be rescinded. I should like to know who made the recommendation of a knighthood. In my estimation it was such crass management, such ineptitude, that it must have been either a deliberate provocation or incompetence of an unimaginable scale. Who suggested that our sovereign give such a huge honour to such a man? Not only is his writing appalling, but the fact that he has insulted Islam means that the honour is a deliberate provocation of Saudi Arabia and other moderate allies.

The honour gives succour to the fanatics in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries to fight the regimes in place, such as King Abdullah's and the Governments who want to align themselves and show solidarity with the west. Ultimately, they will say, "There you are—you are negotiating and dealing with people who deliberately give honours to people who blaspheme against our religion." I am sorry to end on a relatively negative note, but we must be extremely careful not to upset our key moderate allies.

I end by saying to the Minister that I shall continue, as long as I am a Member of Parliament, to promote Anglo-Saudi relations. Why? Because I genuinely believe that Saudi Arabia plays, and will continue to play, an increasingly important role in the stability of the middle east and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I hope that we will continue extensive ministerial visits to Riyadh and that we will invite senior members of the royal family to our country. I hope that the Minister can assure me that there will be a visit before too long. I would also be extremely grateful if he could assure me that everything possible is being done to ensure that our countries are brought ever closer together.

11.32 am

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this important debate. I intend to make a brief speech, which is no reflection on the debate or on Saudi Arabia; it reflects the fact that the hon. Gentleman has covered many of the issues involved eloquently and comprehensively.

I first visited Saudi Arabia approximately two years ago with the all-party group. I was stunned by the manner in which the Saudi Arabian people received us and behaved during the visit, which was nothing but courteous all the way. From the outset we met enthusiasm, particularly from young people. I said earlier that Saudi Arabia is striving for democracy, and the young people whom I met have a great appetite for it. They recognise the benefits of the current system but feel that there is a need for change. They are definitely up for change, and that particularly came across in the universities, where we went to see young people. The facilities that they have and the quality of the training and education are second to none, and the young people reminded us at every opportunity that that education system is based on the British one and that they are striving to achieve the level of education that we have.

Another thing that we saw in Saudi Arabia was the role of women. You may be aware, Miss Begg, that women are not treated very well there, judged by our standards and values, but, as the hon. Gentleman said earlier, it would be wrong for us to impose our values on another country. It will have to learn from its own mistakes, as we in this country did. The women there are looking for radical change. For instance, they are not allowed to drive cars, which is one thing that they are now saying that they would like to do, rather than having to depend on their husbands or brothers to drive them around.

If we look at the history of Britain—it is true of any country—we see that we have made an awful lot of mistakes that we are not proud of. When people set out to discredit Saudi Arabia, particularly in this country, they should remember that we do not have a perfect history and that we learned only from history. For us to lecture other countries that are trying to achieve the level of democracy that we have would be wrong. We should be doing everything that we can to help people in Saudi Arabia, particularly young people. If there is going to be change and transition, it should be peaceful.

When we were over there, we met the Saudi chamber of commerce. It was extremely disappointed by the lack of interest from British companies in securing more business from Saudi Arabia. It asked us to encourage the British Chambers of Commerce to be more proactive in encouraging British companies to do business there—not just the BAE Systems of this world but other companies in the UK that would benefit from working alongside the Saudi Arabians. That was encouraging.

One downside was that we were there just at the time when British Airways unfortunately decided to withdraw from Saudi Arabia. That sent a profound and unfortunate message to the Saudi Arabians that Britain did not want to be part of the new business culture there. It was a rather unfortunate incident. When British Airways pulled out, other companies moved in, and there are lessons to be learned from that.

I am proud of the role that BAE Systems has played in Saudi Arabia and of the jobs that it has created in this country. Just outside my constituency, the shipyards on the Clyde are building ships for BAE Systems and other systems that can be used in defence mechanisms in Saudi Arabia. That is creating a great deal of wealth for the country, producing apprenticeships and giving training and good-quality paid jobs to people who might not otherwise have got them.

Daniel Kawczynski: On the hon. Gentleman's point about British Airways pulling out of direct flights to Saudi Arabia, has he, as chairman of the all-party group, had the opportunity to communicate our frustrations to British Airways? If not, is he prepared to meet British Airways with me to ask it to explain why it cut that service?

Jim Sheridan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention. At the time, the then chairman of the all-party group wrote to British Airways expressing our displeasure at the way that it had behaved. I would be more than happy to arrange yet another meeting with BA to see whether it will reconsider its position. My concern is that the market that was there for British Airways may now have gone. I may be wrong, but I think that it is Lufthansa that has moved in and taken up that market. I am more than happy to try to arrange a meeting with senior people at British Airways to attempt to re-engage that market because, if nothing else, it would send a clear message to the Saudi Arabians that British companies want to do business. I can think of no better way to communicate that than for British Airways to fly the British flag into Riyadh, which would send a clear message that things had changed.

On the whole question of jobs and BAE Systems, I think that this country would be worse off both financially and in job terms if we were to try to distance ourselves from Saudi Arabia. People will always think of reasons to find fault with other countries, but that is not helpful in the present instance.

On the peace initiative, I would like our new peace envoy to visit Saudi Arabia and do all that he can to ensure that peace can be sought in the unstable region that is the middle east. There is no doubt whatever in my mind that there will only be peace in the region if Saudi Arabia is at the heart of it. In my view, Saudi Arabia is the only country in the middle east that can deliver a sustainable peace and act as an honest peace broker in that region.

I am confident that, if Britain tries to exclude itself, whether it be in relation to jobs, education, universities or whatever, other countries will move in and fill the vacuum. We are extremely proud of the young people who are now being educated the length and breadth of Britain. Saudi Arabian students have a big interest in Edinburgh, for instance, which is greatly appreciated.

I said that I wanted to be brief. The only thing left to say is that I would like to see what the Government can do to embrace Saudi officials and diplomats and to ensure that they are friends of this country and welcome here. Any formal visits that can be arranged should be arranged. The Government should be doing all that they can to encourage Saudi Arabians to come here, and to encourage British companies to go to Saudi Arabia and learn and share our common interests, so that both countries can develop and grow for the future.

11.42 am

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing the debate, especially in light of recent tensions between the two Governments; the debate is timely to say the least. He gave an eloquent

[Mark Hunter]

although, I am bound to say, rather partial account of the current state of our relationship with the Saudi Arabian Government.

Let me make it clear at the outset of my remarks that we should not underestimate the importance of Saudi Arabia. It has enormous influence in the region, as other hon. Members have said, and it has an invaluable relationship with the UK. It is our largest export market in the region—UK exports reached some £1.4 billion in 2002. We also have a close relationship with the Saudis on security matters. Our co-operation on terrorism is well known and highly necessary, as is the Saudi influence in the middle east peace process, to which hon. Members have referred as well. A close relationship with Saudi Arabia is of course worth preserving, not least because the issues that divide us can be resolved only through persistent dialogue.

That said, there is another side to the relationship from the side that we have heard much about in the debate. Before I reach the main part of my speech, let me say that I think that it would be wrong not to talk a little more about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and how that impacts on its relationship with the United Kingdom.

There is no doubt in the international community that there is still serious concern about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. The incidence of capital punishment in particular is clearly on the increase. This year there have already been 102 executions, compared with 38 in 2006. Discrimination against women has already been spoken of. It continues to be widespread and invidious, as do limitations on freedom of expression.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman mentions capital punishment in Saudi Arabia. We have many more debates on the United States in this Chamber than on Saudi Arabia, yet I have never known any hon. Member to criticise the Americans for having capital punishment. For some reason, however, when middle eastern countries are mentioned, capital punishment is always referred to. It is disingenuous of us to treat Saudi Arabia differently from the United States.

Mark Hunter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I have to say that colleagues and I have a very simple view on human rights, which is that they are indivisible and that they apply to all of us—wherever we are in the world and of whatever religion or faith we are. I am just as keen to make similar points about other countries, including the United States, where the death penalty is still in use. However, the United States is not among those countries that still routinely indulge in amputations—another of the human rights abuses that has been laid at the door of the Saudi Arabian Government by bodies such as Amnesty International.

I want to be fair, however. It is true that Saudi Arabia has now established a national human rights association, but it is also fair to say that in many areas its actions still seem to speak far more loudly than its words. Let me make one further point on that. Amnesty has recently drawn the public's attention to the example of Rizana Nafeek, a girl of 19 who is being sentenced to death for a crime committed when she was just 17. That is despite Saudi Arabia having signed the convention on the rights of the child, which specifically prohibits the execution of offenders for crimes that were committed when they were under 18. As it happens, it has also signed the international convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Yet, as hon. Members have said, it continues to discriminate against women in many ways. If signatory countries are allowed to behave in a way that flies in the face of the conventions that they sign, as Saudi Arabia seems to have done, that surely undermines the effectiveness of the relevant documents and treaties.

I should like to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to ensure that Saudi Arabia abides by the human rights agreements that they have already signed up to. Will he tell us his view of countries which sign such agreements and then fail to abide by them?

Jim Sheridan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on the question of discrimination against women. He may recall, however, that it is not that long since we discriminated against women in this country by denying them the right to vote.

Mark Hunter: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention. He makes a point, but I am not sure that the comparison is truly valid. It is some years since women were denied the right to vote in this country and, although the situation changed all too late in the opinion of many hon. Members, I do not entirely accept the analogy between what happened here and the kind of discrimination to which I am referring. We have heard about the limitations on women's right to drive; they need written permission from a male in order to drive cars and so on. That is a type of discrimination that is entirely out of place in a modern society.

It would be impossible to discuss the current state of relations with Saudi Arabia without touching on the events surrounding the BAE Systems Al-Yamamah arms deal and the way in which it has affected the UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia. The investigation into that deal by the Serious Fraud Office continues to put considerable pressure on the UK's relationship with the Saudis.

One of the greatest tragedies of the alleged BAE Systems corruption is that it has besmirched the name of a fine British company, its dedicated work force, and the BAE Systems Woodford site in my constituency. I, too, am deeply concerned about the lasting damage done to the reputation of British business abroad and about the impact on British jobs at home. That does not alter the fact that valid questions need to be asked about the contracts and about how our relationship with Saudi Arabia affected the decision to abandon the Serious Fraud Office investigation into the BAE deal with the Saudis. The exact reasons for dropping the SFO inquiry are still somewhat unclear. As the matter has been discussed at great length by my colleagues on the Floor of the House, it is perhaps inappropriate to go into much more detail today. Suffice it to say that allegations have been made by the BBC, *The Guardian* and others that the deal was not limited to a single company or individual, but reached into the very heart of the Government. If the allegations are correct, the

Government certainly have questions to answer and need to live up to some of their promises on accountable government and ethical foreign policy.

One of the reasons for dropping the inquiry was certainly pressure from the Saudi Arabian Government themselves—an issue that we think deserves to be probed further. Mr. Blair himself said that the SFO investigation would have wrecked the relationship with Saudi Arabia if he had allowed it to continue. I understand that the Saudi Arabian Government were reported to have threatened to pull out of the arms deal and to cut off diplomatic and intelligence ties if the investigation continued. Although there is no doubt that the investigation would have put a strain on Saudi Arabian and UK relations, the decision to drop it was in our opinion fundamentally wrong and inexplicable in the circumstances. Not only has the individual involved on the Saudi side of the arrangement now been named and shamed but the US is still determined to investigate the matter further, and, as we know, the US has arguably as much to lose as we do in Saudi Arabia.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman says that the individual has been named and shamed, but no such thing has happened. They have not been shamed because nothing has been proven. The BBC and others have simply made spurious allegations. I suspected that the Liberal Democrats would try to rake up the problems of BAE Systems again and I regret that the hon. Gentleman has done so. When we consider all the problems that our constituents are facing in this country—for example, with housing, floods and other issues—for the Liberal Democrats to use one of their Opposition days to debate a probe into BAE Systems was shocking, appalling and a gross abuse of the priorities of the House. I hope that he will move on and concentrate on the positive side of our relations and the vital importance of trade, rather than raking up such regrettable matters.

Mark Hunter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which was surprising only in the sense that it took him so long to rise to his feet to make that point. In the context of today's debate on UK relations with Saudi Arabia it would seem ridiculous not to spend at least some time discussing what is currently the single most prominent issue in that relationship, whether the hon. Gentleman likes it or not. As I said when I started my remarks, this subject has barely been touched on by the hon. Members who have spoken so far. It would be quite wrong for us not to give a proper airing to something of genuine concern.

Hon. Members will know that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is still considering the issues relating to BAE Systems. It should concern us greatly that, although the UK is a signatory of the 1997 OECD convention on bribery, by halting the investigation, the Government are undermining its effectiveness. The chair of the OECD said that the decision by the Attorney-General to halt the investigation was contrary to article 5 of the convention, which states that inquiries

"shall not be influenced by considerations of national economic interest, the potential effect upon relations with another state, or the identity of the natural or legal persons involved".

The point is clear: nobody is above the law. An independent investigation needs to take place to determine whether there was any wrongdoing.

Although we do not underestimate the importance of our relationship and ties with Saudi Arabia, particularly in relation to security in the middle east, we stand by the OECD convention that any effect on the relationship between the countries involved should not prevent an investigation from continuing. Given those circumstances, perhaps the Minister will tell us what form the warnings from Saudi Arabia took. What was the Government's initial reaction when Saudi Arabia threatened to break off diplomatic intelligence relations? Did the Foreign and Commonwealth Office attempt to pursue the matter through all available channels before the Government made the decision to drop the inquiry?

In addition, was there any discussion at the time about how credible the threats were? I raise the issue of credibility because it should be said that Saudi Arabia needs a relationship with us perhaps as much as we need one with it. Saudi Arabia has security concerns of its own, on which it needs our co-operation. According to the FCO, Saudi Arabia relies on the UK because we are its joint fourth largest investor. Surely the threat of cutting off all diplomatic and intelligence ties was, if not empty, at least unlikely. Does the Minister agree that the Saudi Government's threats to withdraw security co-operation unless the inquiry was dropped were simply unacceptable? Does he not think that we have set a dangerous precedent to Saudi Arabia and other countries with whom we co-operate? Have any of the other countries that are being investigated in relation to BAE Systems made similar threats in response to the investigation?

Finally, if, as it seems, our diplomatic links failed on that occasion, how does the Minister envisage the relationship with Saudi Arabia continuing once our Government have accepted the ultimatum? Such questions need to be answered. It is extremely important that there is greater parliamentary accountability on such matters and we need to ensure that there is greater transparency in our Government's dealings with the Saudi Arabian Government.

11.57 am

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing the debate. We look forward to the Minister's response, particularly in view of the reference on today's Order Paper to a written ministerial statement announcing a state visit by the King of Saudi Arabia to this country. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us about that.

When introducing the debate, my hon. Friend was right to point to the breadth of interests that bring together the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. We have a long-standing set of relationships with the various countries of the Arabian peninsula, and this debate gives us the opportunity to reassert the importance of those relationships, particularly the one that we have with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At times, there has been a danger that we have neglected those historic ties and there is certainly evidence that our partners and competitors in France and Germany have mounted a vigorous programme of bilateral contacts with Riyadh and other capitals in the region.

[Mr. David Lidington]

I would like the Government to lead a long-term effort, with cross-party support, to elevate the United Kingdom's relations with all countries in the Gulf. As my hon. Friend pointed out, such an initiative would cover a wide range of political subjects, such as economic and commercial co-operation, security ties, links between the Parliaments and educational institutions in our various countries, cultural links, co-operation against terrorism and nuclear proliferation, and sporting ties, which the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Devine), who is no longer in his place, mentioned.

Jim Sheridan: The socialist.

Mr. Lidington: Yes, the socialist.

It is not just a question of bilateral relationships. Through our membership of the European Union and NATO, we have the opportunity to strengthen multilateral relations between Europe and Saudi Arabia. I hope that the Minister will say a little about the state of the EU's negotiations on a free trade agreement with Saudi Arabia and the other countries in the region and on the development of the strategic partnership between the EU and the Gulf Co-operation Council. The development of those twin initiatives would be an important way of strengthening long-term relations, at a time when, for reasons that we all understand—in particular, owing to events in Iraq in recent years—there is tension and suspicion between people and countries in western Europe and those in the Muslim and, particularly, Arab world.

I also hope that the Minister will say something about NATO's Istanbul initiative, to which a number of countries in the Gulf region have signed up already. It would be to our advantage, and that of the EU, if Saudi Arabia were to participate as well. What are the latest developments on that front?

I shall mention briefly the relationship between Britain and Saudi Arabia on three international issues: the Israel-Palestine conflict, Iraq and our broader efforts against terrorism. I voice, at least in passing, my agreement with some of the comments of the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mark Hunter) about human rights. Although we should continue to work for close and friendly relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, British Ministers should not be precluded from raising, with their Saudi counterparts, concerns about human rights. In particular, I am talking about complaints, sometimes from British residents in Saudi Arabia, about legal processes, allegations of torture and, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) mentioned in an intervention, the legal discrimination against minority religions.

I understand the point that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan) made about our country's record; we can look back to the legacy of the penal laws, Test Acts and so on. I also acknowledge the unique sensitivity of Saudi Arabia as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques", but nevertheless, it is quite fair that the debate about religious freedom and minorities should be on the agenda in an exchange on human rights concerns.

Daniel Kawczynski: Does my hon. Friend agree that although some countries are making progress on their human rights record, others are actually getting worse? I would cite Burma—Myanmar—as an example of where human rights are getting significantly worse, whereas I would argue that Saudi Arabia is starting to improve its record. It is looking at these issues seriously and is starting to make improvements.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend's point reinforces the need for extensive contact and co-operation between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia across a wide range of institutions and covering many different areas of policy, because it is through those relationships that we start to understand each other's particular political and legal traditions. That will also allow for an exchange of ideas that, I hope, will be fruitful in encouraging developments of the sort to which he referred.

Jim Sheridan: On human rights, the hon. Gentleman need look no further than Turkey, which is being encouraged to join the European Union. Saudi Arabia is a young country whose young people need to be encouraged to make changes. It is not for us to impose change or our values on them, but to encourage and assist those with an appetite for change.

Mr. Lidington: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point: it is important that human rights are implemented in a way that allows people in a particular country to understand that it is a process of which they have ownership, and not a political model being imposed on them from outside.

I shall turn to the Israel-Palestine issue and take up the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham about the Arab peace plan, of which Saudi Arabia can be considered, fairly, to be the author. It is worth saying also that Saudi Arabia was instrumental in bringing about what turned out to be a short-lived Palestinian Government of national unity and in securing an agreement, earlier in the year, between Fatah and Hamas.

I would be interested to hear the Government's current assessment of the Arab peace initiative, whether Britain is seeking to encourage further direct dialogue between Israel and the Arab nations and, in particular, whether the Government hope that Saudi Arabia would be included in such discussions. Furthermore, do Ministers envisage a role for Saudi Arabia in trying to re-establish some kind of stability in the Palestinian Administration? For example, does the Minister think that the Saudis might be in a position to persuade the leadership of Hamas to accept the conditions laid down by the Quartet, on behalf of the international community, for direct involvement in the peace process?

The Opposition welcome very much President Bush's recent announcement of an international conference on the middle east peace process to be held in the autumn. It is very important that such a conference involves Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region. The more that the regional partners feel that they have a role in shaping this process, the greater the likelihood is that the bitter mistrust that currently exists can be overcome. Have the Government had any indications from Riyadh that Saudi Arabia, in principle, would be willing to attend the conference that the United States plans to convene?

On Iraq, the Baker-Hamilton report concluded that Saudi Arabia was capable of playing a key role in reconciling differences between the various Iraqi factions and in building broader support within the Islamic world for stabilisation in Iraq. However, does the current arrangement for meetings of Iraq's neighbouring countries provide an adequate forum for such influence to be exerted? I noted with interest some press reports from Washington in the last week that the US Administration might be trying to find a way in which to institutionalise to a greater extent such meetings of Iraq's neighbours. Would the British Government support such a move and do we need perhaps to have some kind of international contact group bringing together the key regional players with members of the United Nations Security Council?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham pointed out, on counter-terrorism, there is no doubt that Saudi Arabia has suffered grievously from terrorist attacks. The attacks on British residents and British visitors to Saudi Arabia attract the headlines in Britain, but many families in Saudi Arabia have lost relatives and friends and been put in fear as a consequence of terrorism. I will therefore strongly support any move that the Government make to strengthen co-operation between the two Governments, which is an essential part of a successful struggle against international terrorism.

Questions need to be asked, however. There are reports that a large proportion of the foreign militants who are targeting coalition troops and Iraqi civilians and security forces in Iraq have come over the border from Saudi Arabia. Anyone who looks at a map will know that that border is not easy to police, but are the Government confident that the Saudi Government are taking all the measures that they can to prevent infiltration across Saudi Arabia's borders into Iraq?

Mark Pritchard: Does my hon. Friend agree that this would be an opportune moment for the Government to state on the record whether British troops have interdicted Saudi nationals in Iraq and whether they have been detained and/or returned to Saudi Arabia?

Mr. Lidington: It would be helpful to have that information, and the Minister will have heard my hon. Friend's comments.

We hope and pray that there will be no further terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia, but clearly the risk still exists. Does the Minister believe that adequate contingency plans are in place in case of a major terrorist attack on British people and British interests in Saudi Arabia? In particular, is he confident that our embassy in Riyadh has the plans and the resources to be able to cope in such circumstances?

Deepening our links with the many friendly Muslim nations of the Gulf should be one of the prime goals of British foreign policy. Those countries—pre-eminently, Saudi Arabia—are vital interlocutors for anyone who wishes to understand what is happening in the region and they are, in many cases, important allies whose alliance with the United Kingdom goes back over a great many years. Above all, the long-term friendship of their Governments and peoples is essential to ensuring an international understanding that although we are committed to a struggle against international terrorism, we have no wish at all to embark on a clash of civilisations. We need a strengthening partnership between Britain, its western partners and Saudi Arabia and the other nations of the peninsula and the Gulf region. That is very much in our national interest.

12.13 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Jim Murphy): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Hood, and I thank Miss Begg for her earlier oversight of our proceedings.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this important debate. I am delighted to make a guest appearance in a discussion of this area of the world. That does not reflect any ambitions for Saudi membership of the EU; it simply reflects the fact that my hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East is in the middle east. I respond to the deliberations today as a guest—as the Minister for Europe.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham on the way in which he conveyed his argument. I think that I am joined in that by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. His in-depth understanding of and passion for Saudi Arabia were clear to all who listened. Although hon. Members made it clear that there were specific areas of disagreement with his observations, it was clear that he had a real understanding of and passion for that country.

The hon. Gentleman's comments were amplified by those of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan), who is the chair of the all-party group on Saudi Arabia. We had the opportunity—it was indeed an opportunity—to listen to his reflections on the challenges facing Saudi Arabia and his assessment of our bilateral relationship. I will respond, in the time available, to the plethora of specific questions that were asked and observations that were made once I have set out some of the specifics of the important UK-Saudi bilateral relations.

I am pleased—this is not just at the instigation of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber—to announce today that Her Majesty the Queen has invited His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, custodian of the two holy mosques, to pay a state visit to the United Kingdom from 30 October to 1 November 2007. The visit will further strengthen the good relations that exist between the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

I want at the outset to outline why the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is such an important ally for the United Kingdom. We have a long history of friendship, understanding and co-operation. Saudi Arabia is an important partner in the region. That co-operation covers bilateral, regional and international issues, including counter-terrorism, energy security, trade and investment, economic reform, Iraq, Iran, the middle east peace process and Lebanon. Our relationship is broadly based and vital to UK interests, and helps us to make progress on our international objectives.

One of the most important of those objectives, which was raised by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham, by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North and by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), concerns the middle east peace process. The UK's clear view is that the Arab world has a key role to play in encouraging progress in

[Mr. Jim Murphy]

the middle east peace process by supporting the efforts of President Abbas, by taking forward the Arab peace initiative and by helping to ensure international support and co-operation in respect of that initiative.

The Arab peace initiative is based on King Abdullah's proposal and was put forward by the Arab League in 2002, as the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said. It was then re-endorsed at the Arab League summit in Riyadh in March this year. The action following the Riyadh summit has been positive. The Arab League representatives are due to travel to Israel shortly to continue their work. That picks up on the question raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury. King Abdullah also brokered the Mecca agreement in February 2007, which helped to lead to the formation of a Palestinian national unity Government.

Of course Saudi Arabia has a continuing role now and in the future in respect of the middle east peace process, primarily through the Arab League, but it would help if others in the region, particularly Iran, which is not a member of the Arab League, were able to show that there is willingness on all sides to reach consensus. It is unhelpful that the Iranian leadership continues, to all intents and purposes, to call for the active destruction of the state of Israel, continues denial of the holocaust and continues what can only be interpreted as a misguided approach to a nuclear programme. Therefore, although it is right that the Arab League continues to engage in trying to make progress, it is fair to acknowledge the challenge that Israel faces in trying to find concerted, consistent, universal partners in the peace process in that region.

Saudi Arabia shares our concerns about Iran's nuclear programme. Saudi Arabia, like us, has been working to implement the sanctions in UN Security Council resolutions 1737 and 1747 and has been supportive of the sanctions process. If Iran continues to fail to suspend its enrichment programme, we will seek a further resolution, and we look forward to Saudi Arabia's continuing support in that international endeavour.

On the specific issue of Iraq, Saudi Arabia supports the political process and has used its influence with Iraqi Sunnis to persuade them to engage in the political process. It has a critical role to play in supporting Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's broad-based Government, including through the international compact and the provision of border security. The Saudis fully recognise that the success of the revised Baghdad security plan is critical to the future stability of not only Iraq but the whole region. In response to the specific point raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury, let me say that the Saudis are always looking at ways to stop terrorists carrying out cross-border terrorism between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and there are also new laws on the funding of groups. We continue to work with the Saudis on such important security issues.

Elsewhere in the region, the Saudis are playing an enhanced role. They are actively involved in efforts to resolve the political crisis in Lebanon, and we have welcomed their constructive efforts, which have sought to bring the parties in Lebanon together. Since last year's conflict, they have been a major donor in Lebanon's reconstruction process and they pledged more than $1 billion in loans and grants at the Paris conference on Lebanon. Furthermore, they contributed $1 billion at the Yemen donor conference, which the UK hosted in November 2006.

As hon. Members on both sides have recognised, Saudi Arabia is one of the UK's key counter-terrorism partners, and we maintain a high level of bilateral co-operation. Saudi Arabia plays a pivotal role, both regionally and internationally, in the global response to the terrorist threat, including in countering extremism and disrupting terrorist networks on its own territory.

Hon. Members have, fairly, commented on the political process and reform in Saudi Arabia. While remaining sensitive to the conservative majority's views, King Abdullah has introduced significant incremental reforms in recent years. They include strengthening the Shura council, holding partial—only partial—municipal elections, establishing a number of civil society organisations and promoting women's participation in elections to professional bodies and educational reform.

I heard the point about religious freedom, which was raised by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), as well as a number of additional points. The annual UK/Saudi "Two Kingdoms" conference provides a bilateral framework for frank and honest dialogue on issues such as economic reform, education, the role of women, civil society and human rights in Saudi Arabia. We continue to support reform in Saudi Arabia by providing funding for specific projects, such as capacity-building for civil society organisations, helping the Ministry of Education and the vocational training agency to strengthen their English language training and encouraging young entrepreneurs.

Saudi Arabia's human rights record remains poor. Although the pace of reform is slow by western standards, the authorities have to balance their wish for faster reform against the wishes of a deeply conservative majority, many of whose members appear to oppose any reform in principle.

Jim Sheridan: Does the Minister agree that reform in Saudi Arabia can go only at the pace that Saudi Arabia wants it to and that it is our job to encourage reform? However, on the issue of women, will the Minister tell the Saudi Government that women have, with the exception of Mrs. Thatcher, played a positive role in this country and, in particular, in Parliament?

Mr. Murphy: I wonder whether that intervention was prepared when Miss Begg was overseeing our proceedings earlier. Thus far, she has been the only woman to participate in our debate, although I am, of course, delighted that my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Ms Clark) are with us.

If colleagues will allow me, I will make a couple of points about our bilateral trade relationship with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia remains the UK's largest trade and investment partner in the middle east and accounts for 25 per cent. of the Arab world's GDP, which is more than the other five Gulf Co-operation Council countries and Egypt combined. On the point about an EU trade agreement, conversations continue, and further meetings are planned for October. We would hope to make quick progress on the issue.

Today, the UK's trade and investment links with Saudi Arabia are stronger than ever and they are growing. Over the past few months, the importance of that relationship has been clearly demonstrated at Government level by a number of high-level visits. Those include visits by the Duke of York, in his role as special representative for trade and investment, and by UK Trade and Investment's chief executive, Andrew Cahn. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor also visited Saudi Arabia in May, in his role as the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Let me respond now to the points raised by the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mark Hunter). In the short time available, I do not intend to rehearse the debate that we had on the Floor of the House, and nor do I wish to add to the detailed responses that the Solicitor-General and the Minister for the Middle East offered on specific points. However, I do want to say on the record once again that the Serious Fraud Office's decision was taken by the director alone. The Government have given good reason to believe that there is a real danger to our co-operation with a country that is vital to us, and I do not use the word "vital" lightly in describing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's importance to us. It would have been wholly irresponsible of us to ignore that information and wholly wrong not to make the SFO aware of it. The SFO made a decision based on that evidence, and, on balance, we believe that it was the right decision. We are also confident that it is compatible with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention.

The hon. Gentleman reflected his constituency interest in an observation about BAE's good name, but let me gently tell him that the tone of some of his hon. Friends' comments in recent weeks—it was perhaps unintentional—does not do an awful lot to enhance the well-deserved good name of BAE in this country and internationally.

Daniel Kawczynski: Does the Minister agree that the Liberal Democrats can make such comments knowing full well that they will never be in government, whereas he, being in government, must be far more aware of the sensitivities on these issues?

Mr. Murphy: Of course. An expectation of permanent opposition brings one to easy judgments and cheap soundbites, although I have no idea whether that was at play in the Liberal Democrats' positioning on this important issue.

Mark Hunter: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Murphy: As long as there are no cheap soundbites.

Mark Hunter: Far be it from me to make cheap comments in this important debate. I have listened carefully to the Minister, but will he say on the record whether he agrees that no individual, company or country should be above the law?

Mr. Murphy: I have already said very clearly that the decision that was taken was compatible with the OECD convention and I have no intention of re-running the debate that we recently had on the Floor of the House for a number of hours. I think that hon. Members would thank us for not doing so.

Our bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia is on the up. UK exports of goods and services to the kingdom were worth more than £3 billion in 2006. The UK is also a major investor in the kingdom, and there are more than 150 UK/Saudi joint ventures, with total investments of about $14.5 billion. The amounts earmarked for investment over the present period are staggering. Investment of an estimated $630 billion in Government projects and more than $800 billion in private sector projects is planned over the next 20 years.

Our relationship with Saudi Arabia is important and strategic, and I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham for giving us all the opportunity to rehearse just how important it is to the UK diplomatically and internationally in terms of trade, the economy and jobs.

International Labour Law

12.30 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Mr. Hood, it is always a delight to see you in the Chair and to have the opportunity to raise a subject of great importance. I stand here as a trade union MP, in the sense that I have the support of ASLEF, the train drivers' union. However, the matter that I want to raise today has enormous importance right across the field of representation.

I and other Labour Members of Parliament are here today because of the existence of trade unions. It is not an accident that trade unions began in the United Kingdom. We have always had a commitment—I think that it exists in the Anglo-Saxon character—that makes us strongly resent anything that happens to the detriment of fair play, in industrial relations or with respect to any organisational change. I think, therefore, that it is important that this country should uphold, as it does, the labour laws that are part and parcel of our commitment to fairness, decency and proper standards.

I want to talk today about a bus company. The way in which United Kingdom companies operate, in the UK and elsewhere, affects their efficiency and their ability to succeed. It is their particular responsibility to ensure that what they do is properly supported by the rules of law and, more than that, that it clearly shows a proper commitment to justice and the general principles on which the International Labour Organisation declarations are based. It is therefore important to raise the matter of First Group.

First Group is a very successful transport company. It has expanded from a very small base into the railway and bus industries. Very many companies are involved with it. It has been extraordinarily successful and, in this country, very well run. It has conducted proper industrial relations. It has a strong and robust connection with the Transport and General Workers Union and it has made its commitment to proper trade relations clear. It is therefore worrying to see, as it begins to expand elsewhere, that that may not necessarily be a tradition that is fully carried out in other countries. We should perhaps today consider some of the things that are happening, which will rebound badly not just on First Group but on the reputation of United Kingdom companies.

We might first refer to passages in the ILO conventions on trade union rights and civil liberties. Members of Parliament frequently mention their commitment to the ILO conventions; I wonder how many of them have read the conventions, including the provisions that state

"that a system of democracy is fundamental for the free exercise of trade union rights";

that for

"the contribution of trade unions and employers' organizations to be properly useful and credible, they must be able to carry out their activities in a climate of freedom and security";

and that a

"free trade union movement can develop only under a regime which guarantees fundamental rights, including the right of trade unionists to hold meetings in trade union premises, freedom of opinion expressed through speech and the press and the right of detained trade unionists to enjoy the guarantees of normal judicial procedure".

Another paragraph states:

"The International Labour Conference has pointed out that the right of assembly, freedom of opinion and expression and, in particular, freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers constitute civil liberties which are essential".

A commitment is also made:

"Although holders of trade union office do not, by virtue of their position, have the right to transgress legal provisions in force, these provisions should not infringe the basic guarantees of freedom of association, nor should they sanction activities which, in accordance with the principles of freedom of association, should be considered as legitimate".

That is all very clear and good and is well supported in a Parliament that has grown up because of reaction to the imposition of unfair or unacceptable laws.

Why, then, do I worry about what First Group is doing elsewhere? First Group is a company that because it is successful—I am happy to record that—is expanding. In the United States it is not just expanding into one company; it is expanding into a much larger company than was originally intended. Forty per cent. of the non-management staff of Laidlaw International Inc., which First Student appears to be about to take over, for $2.8 billion, are represented by trade unions. Why should that be a matter for concern? First Group is facing a serious risk to its reputation and it is best to speak plainly. It is because of its continuing aggressive interference in workers' organising rights, community consensus and the adequate funding of school transport services.

I spoke to trade union representatives who came here from the United States of America, because I am very concerned about the reputation of transport companies, whether they operate in the UK or organise elsewhere. I knew very little of the situation and asked to be given a detailed brief. I was very surprised to see that, in spite of the fact that the company has pledged to support the principles of the ILO conventions on workers' freedom of association, three different reports produced for the Teamsters union by well respected members of universities—Lance Compa of Cornell, a professor specialising in labour and human rights law, John Logan, a scholar and professor at the school of management at the London School of Economics, and Fred Feinstein, who was on the US National Labour Relations Board, the Government agency that enforces federal labour law—make it clear that there has been a consistent, targeted and deliberate attempt to make it almost impossible for members of the First Student companies to organise, meet together and operate as a proper trade union. There is considerable detail in all the reports, which I will spare you, Mr. Hood, because I hope that we can accept that anyone who wants to know the details will read the "Third Report on Freedom of Association and Workers' Rights Violations at First Student, Inc."

Those matters were outlined to me by individual members of the Teamsters union. I was very taken by the representatives who came to the House of Commons. A lady who was a bus driver on a student bus was, apart from her accent, very much like the sort of person I would meet in my constituency. She was a lone mother, entirely on her own, who had found, in her job, a way to combine earning an income and running her family. She ran a bus journey for students, to and fro twice a day. She was not in any way an extreme or difficult person.

She was the sort of person one would hope to see forming the cadre of trade union representatives. It is extraordinarily worrying that those workers were subjected to a targeted and consistent programme of something that I will not call persuasion, because it seems to me that persuasion, particularly on the part of management, must be couched in very controlled and considered terms; they were subjected to a very deliberate attempt to persuade them that joining the union or seeking together to create a union in their work place would lead to very direct consequences for them. One threat appears to have been, "We'll deal with your depot in the way that we dealt with Baltimore," where, as far as one can see, because the staff voted for trade union representation, they were told that that depot would be shut down—and that is what happened.

We should be quite clear about such matters in this country. If a similar situation arose with a bus company in the UK, I, personally, and, I am sure, many other trade union representatives in this House, as well as those who do not directly belong to trade unions but are concerned about labour relations because of their commitment to fairness, would seek to raise the matter time and again. The UK Government have made it plain that even though they have no intention of interfering with and should not interfere with the commitment of UK companies abroad to the legal systems in which they cease to operate, they nevertheless require those companies to take account of and be responsible to the ILO convention. I have made it clear exactly what that implies. The House of Commons has a direct responsibility to tell such companies, "You may operate in the way you think best in a capitalist system. That is, of course, your responsibility: you are responsible to your shareholders and you have a responsibility to ensure that your performance is acceptable to those who support you. However, because you are a British company, you may not ignore aspects of responsible behaviour that we in this country regard as a norm." Commitment to the ILO is absolutely essential.

Today, I received from Moir Lockhead a letter that I found rather nowty, as we would say in my part of the country. Let us say that I did not turn up when he wished to talk to a representative of his and independent monitor who

"would welcome the chance...to discuss the implementation of FirstGroup's workplace human rights".

He assures me that, within the UK, the company will comply with its commitments regarding trade union organisations.

The TGWU has made it clear that it finds it difficult to understand how a company that is so responsible in the UK and complies with its agreements with the trade unions could go so far to impede the creation of trade union rights within the United States. When we say that it is impossible to form a trade union within that company, we are talking not about the wilder shores of Saudi Arabia, the jungle regions of Colombia or some of the far-flung pits of Guatemala, but about the United States of America—a country that shares with us a common law system, approximately the same language and a financial system based on the capitalism that is now so fashionable. We have always regarded the United States as having direct roots in its relationship with the UK. I therefore feel more than justified in raising the issue of the anti-union behaviour there, which has been aggressive, deliberate, consistent and larded with the sort of threats that I would find wholly unacceptable if they were targeted at members of my constituency.

I finish by making this point. I have in my time—I am only 21, but I have been around for a little while—met trade unionists and seen trade unions being run by people who were venal, inefficient, incompetent, arrogant and unacceptable. I have seen arguments put forward in the name of trade unionism that I found difficult to recognise, but I have also, over a lifetime of commitment to the labour movement, seen trade unions filled with people who were wholly committed to fairness, decency and the improvement of conditions for their fellow workers. I have seen people pay a high price for their trade unionism in this country, and I do not find that acceptable, but we now have a country that accepts the right of workers to organise. It is a very small thing to ask of a successful company in the transport industry that it should comply with the same standards and norms elsewhere, and I am astonished that it has not reached that conclusion of its own volition. The House of Commons would be unwise to ignore the behaviour of such a successful British company, lest it be thought that that is the way in which we operate as soon as we leave UK shores.

12.45 pm

The Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs (Mr. Pat McFadden): My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) has been in the House for a great many years and has a great deal of experience. Any Minister responding to a case made by her would do so with some care and caution. I know that she cares deeply about this issue, and I shall address the two main issues that she discussed—trade unions and the International Labour Organisation conventions, and the company that she talked about.

Let me start with international labour standards, which are set out in various international treaties. Perhaps the most quoted are those that my hon. Friend mentioned—the ILO conventions and the European convention on human rights. The UK was one of the founding members of the ILO and was among the first to ratify its key conventions, including the central ones relating to trade union rights—conventions 87 and 98. We therefore take our obligations seriously. During the 1980s, our reputation was diminished internationally by the removal of trade union rights at GCHQ, and hon. Members will recall that one of the first acts of the Labour Government when they came to office in 1997 was to restore trade union rights at GCHQ, which signalled both domestically and internationally where we stood on these issues.

The ILO has mechanisms to monitor member state compliance with international standards, and there is often debate about whether member states are conforming with the spirit and letter of the conventions. Even this country has been part of those debates over the years, and I am pleased to say that it has never been formally reprimanded by the ILO's governing body, although there has been debate about laws in this country and others and the extent to which they comply with the conventions. The conventions often focus on broad principles, which is important, because they need to apply to many different settings around the world, with different labour market conditions, in both developed and developing countries.

[Mr. Pat McFadden]

Over the years, we have engaged in an ongoing and constructive dialogue with the ILO about the conventions, and I understand that its advisory committees have not interpreted its trade union conventions as requiring companies to recognise trade unions for collective bargaining purposes. That is subject to national legal systems and the negotiation that takes place between unions and companies.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Is my hon. Friend interpreting the right to freedom of association? I have never said that there is a right of a particular trade union to be recognised or that the UK should insist on it. That would be absurd and unacceptable. However, there is clear commitment to freedom of association, as he will be able to read. That is the point that I have made and will continue to make.

Mr. McFadden: I accept my hon. Friend's point. The one that I was making is that when it comes to collective bargaining, recognition is subject to national legal systems and to negotiations between specific companies and their employees.

The ILO conventions can raise issues about conflicting human rights and my hon. Friend mentioned ASLEF. I should point out that UK law limits the entitlement of trade unions to exclude or expel individuals on the grounds of political party membership. Until recently, we believed that that law struck a fair balance between the rights of union members to govern their union affairs and the rights of individuals to hold political beliefs. Earlier this year, the European Court of Human Rights issued a decision in a case involving ASLEF that concluded that that balance was wrong, and we intend to act in response to that judgment.

Mrs. Dunwoody: May I just point out that people must have the right to be in a trade union before they can be barred from one, so the point that the Minister made is not relevant?

Mr. McFadden: My hon. Friend referred in much of her speech to the activities of UK-owned companies operating abroad, particularly those of First Group. She compared its employment practices in the UK and in the US. She also referred to the campaign waged by the Teamsters union to obtain recognition at the company's operations in the US.

I know that the facts about employment relations in the company—my hon. Friend referred to recognition and the approach taken by the parties to recognition ballots—are contested, and I do not intend to become the judge and jury. She referred to several reports into this situation that had been commissioned by the union, and I accept what she says about them. The company has also commissioned its own report, which I understand reaches a different verdict. That makes it somewhat difficult for those of us outside the situation to come to a definitive judgment about a contested situation over union recognition.

Instead of setting myself up as the judge and jury on the particular specific example that my hon. Friend quoted, I should like to focus on the broader issue of how we believe British companies should behave when operating abroad and what employment practices they should follow. One basic rule is that companies should always observe the employment law of the country in which they operate. We expect foreign companies operating in Britain to comply with our laws, and in the same way we expect UK companies to comply with the laws of the countries in which they operate. Obviously, the legal systems in those countries are designed to ensure that employment rights are enforced.

When it comes to ILO obligations, the United States is not signed up to every convention that we are signed up to, and, in any case, virtually every ILO member state faces questions as to whether it is interpreting its obligations fully. These are not clear-cut issues, and different interpretations of treaty obligations are possible. This is not always as simple as saying that because these questions are raised, the basic international standards are not being observed.

It should also be expected that the terms and conditions of work forces around the world will vary, as will even those between work forces in developed countries. That is because labour market conditions, tax and social security systems and so on differ from state to state.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): On terms and conditions for workers internationally, First Group could be used as a template for the way that it treats migrant workers coming into this country because it gives them the same terms and conditions. The Minister is right not to be judge and jury, but given the serious accusations that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) has made, would it not be possible for him to act as a honest broker between both parties?

Mr. McFadden: It would not be wise for me to become a mediator between First Group and Teamsters. The issue should be resolved between the unions and the company within the legal framework in which they operate.

Employment practices are a function of each country's traditions, history and institutional arrangements. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich referred to the trade union influence on our party and on the legal framework that we operate in the UK. Some European countries have legally enforceable collective agreements whereas this country tends not to have them. We probably would be concerned if a German company operating in the UK were to say that collective agreements must be both legally enforceable and contain peace clauses forbidding strikes, as is the case in Germany. Such an approach comes from its tradition; things do not operate in the same way in our tradition.

We do not expect British companies to operate in an identical manner around the globe, but we hope that British companies operating abroad respect local practices and traditions. Of course that does not mean that companies should systematically exploit their work forces or deliberately flout international labour standards. There are minimum core standards that should be applied worldwide.

Mrs. Dunwoody: It is in the interests of the United Kingdom, is it not, that companies based in the UK but operating elsewhere should be successful, responsible

and highly respected? Have the Government no view on the responsibility that companies have to comply with basic laws?

Mr. McFadden: My hon. Friend rightly says that it is important that British companies operating abroad have regard to some of the things that she mentions. We would expect those companies to comply with the legal systems in which they operate. Some countries have ensured that basic standards are built into their employment law, although that is not the case in others. We would encourage British companies operating around the world voluntarily to apply the basic minimum standards. We cannot compel our companies to operate in that way in foreign jurisdictions, although we have instituted arrangements in our own corporate law and we are party to monitoring arrangements that provide for greater openness and transparency in this area.

The Companies Act 2006 brings the regulatory framework up to date to reflect what we see as the modern business environment. It enshrines in statute the concept of enlightened shareholder value, which recognises that directors will be more likely to achieve long-term success for the benefit of their shareholders if their companies pay appropriate regard to wider matters such as the environment and their employees.

The Government are committed to improving company reporting and transparency, and wish to encourage full and transparent corporate reporting to shareholders in both financial and narrative reporting. By improving the way in which companies report on their activities and by enhancing that transparency, shareholders will be able to hold directors to account more effectively.

We made good progress in the Companies Act in bringing together this kind of commercial success with the kind of sustainability that we see in this shareholder value. The key instrument is the business review, which is designed to encourage directors to provide strategic and forward-looking information. All companies, other than small companies, must prepare a business review as part of the directors' annual report. From October, quoted companies must disclose information—to the extent that it is necessary for an understanding of the company's business—on environmental, employee, social and community matters, as well as on contractual and other arrangements. That is of value in adding to the quality of companies' narrative reporting and promoting responsible business behaviour.

Child Support Agency

12.59 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr. Hood, and to Mr. Speaker for allowing me to raise the Child Support Agency's extreme shortcomings, and particularly two constituency cases that will more than amplify those. I am also grateful to the Minister for being here this morning. He has the unenviable task of trying to answer for an agency that I believe is completely out of control.

Let me begin with the case of Ms Sonia Poulton, whose story is among the worst cases of officialdom working against the vulnerable and weak that I have witnessed during 15 years in this House. To date, I have written 23 letters and made 14 telephone calls about Ms Poulton and the maintenance of her daughter Shaye. Neither Ms Poulton nor I are satisfied with her treatment by the CSA, and I am staggered by the gross ineptitude that characterises the agency's dealings with her.

Ms Poulton first approached me on 27 January 2004, three and a half years ago, as her payments from the CSA had ceased owing to a "computer error". Even three years ago, Ms Poulton characterised her position as "hellish" and stated that

"despite repeated promises from them, the situation has seriously deteriorated".

That turned out not to be an isolated occurrence. Throughout 2004, the CSA failed to collect payments because it was told that the father of Ms Poulton's daughter had left his employment with a London local authority. That turned out not to be the case. The local authority for which he worked had failed to fulfil the deduction of earnings order in his paperwork, and the CSA had not chased a response.

Shortly afterwards Shaye's father did move job and in October 2004 a consolatory payment was promised when my office telephoned the MPs' hotline. However, Ms Poulton was informed directly by the CSA a little later that an assessment and a consolatory payment could not be made until a month later in November. The CSA informed us that £110 was sent to Ms Poulton on 27 October, but that was never received. Meanwhile, Sonia Poulton and her daughter were plunged into even greater debt. In December 2004, we saw no ray of hope when the independent case examiner accepted Ms Poulton's case. That move, of course had no effect on the CSA making a payment of £120 on 20 December. It was fitting, however, that Ms Poulton's first payment of 2004 should come in December.

The case was investigated, and the CSA was found to be at fault. It was ordered to consider—only consider—a consolatory payment and compensation to Ms Poulton. Despite being brought before the independent case examiner, who identified its faults, the CSA compounded its error by writing to Ms Poulton in November 2005 announcing that her arrears amounted to £1,335.86, despite earlier reports that they amounted to £5,191.18. I wrote to the agency demanding to know why Ms Poulton's arrears had been reduced by a staggering £3,855.32.

Meanwhile, the independent case examiner recommended that the case should be investigated by the ombudsman, and told the CSA that the arrears occurred only as a

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

result of its maladministration, and that the agency should make an advance payment. By December 2006, the CSA said that the arrears had increased to £4,298.30, but in a characteristic sidestep stated that the advance payment was not ready. Ms Poulton was grossly misled by her CSA caseworker, Shaheen Khan, who was based in the Bolton office. Ms Khan claimed that she had spoken to Shaye's father on 5 January 2007 and established a deduction from earnings order. She claimed that he had submitted the order to his current place of employment and that payments would be forthcoming. Ms Khan verified that both verbally and in writing. Mid February arrived, but maintenance did not. On 21 February, a different CSA employee confirmed that no money had been received by the CSA, and that Shaye's father had in fact left his employment on 3 October, three months earlier, so it is beyond me how Ms Khan was able to speak to Shaye's father on 5 January.

On discovering privately that her former partner had left his place of employment, Sonia Poulton raised the issue, and Ms Khan behaved in a deeply inappropriate and impertinent way according to my constituent. The chief executive's office, no less, subsequently apologised for that behaviour and blamed it on the stress of working in the Bolton office. That particular member of staff's behaviour, which Ms Poulton reported in writing, is deplorable and worthy of disciplinary action, if it has not already been taken.

On 21 February, Ms Poulton wrote to me to say that she had not received payments since October 2006 because the CSA had told her that the maintenance schedule had expired, and no one had thought to put a new one in place. Although a new schedule was prepared from January 2007, no payments were received. In April this year, I chased the CSA and, believe it or not, it could find no record of those responsible for dealing with Ms Poulton's case because—you may have guessed, Mr. Hood—the files had gone missing and the computer system had failed.

The CSA admitted that the Hastings office, where Ms Poulton's case was being handled, was unable to secure a response from the Bolton office, and that if I was unhappy about that, I should write to the independent case examiner. The examiner's reply in May said that the matter had been referred to the CSA chief executive. One could not have made up this story of incompetence.

Finally, on 11 June, my office was told that Shaye's father was receiving jobseeker's allowance, and that no arrears would be collected until his employment recommenced, when a new assessment would be made. Who knows what new and exciting challenges that reassessment will bring. Alison Cox, in the CEO's office, told us that the Bolton office refused to communicate with the rest of the agency. In fact, when Ms Poulton spoke to Ms Cox, she had more up-to-date information, garnered from her MP's office, than the CEO of the agency. That of course raises serious questions about the agency's ability to keep track of cases, and poses serious questions about its internal management.

The CSA's staff agree that something should be done about the Bolton office. I was advised that staff turnover there is high. Information was excessively difficult to extract and the staff had no concept of the fact that they were dealing with people's lives. That is, I think, a conclusion that I would have reached independently, although I was grateful to have it confirmed by the impressions of the staff in the Hastings office—I mean that sincerely.

Overall, Ms Poulton's case is a sorry tale of gross maladministration and lack of consistent information or interest from many of the officers and staff who were duty bound to look out for the interests of young Shaye and her mother. She is still owed thousands of pounds. Will the Minister today guarantee—I do not want mere platitudes—that the matter will be rapidly sorted out?

This case is especially vexing to me, because I have raised it before with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt), who said that the agency would

"be able to clarify all the outstanding points."—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2006; Vol. 442, c. 580.]

Let us hope that today the Minister, for whom I have high regard, can clarify some of the outstanding points.

Let me now turn to my second constituency case. Mr. David Dalleywater first contacted me in February this year stating that the CSA had written to him claiming that he had not been paying the correct maintenance from 2000 to 2006. He was told that he owed arrears of £8,113.51, despite regularly paying £60 per week to the parent who had custody of his child. Later that month, he received a notice of liability order for the revised amount, which had fallen to £5,413.51. It staggers me that the agency can come up with such differing sums so rapidly one after another. That order was based on a letter of 2004, which my constituent denies ever signing. Mr. Dalleywater made several telephone calls, and was told erroneously, but repeatedly in writing and on the telephone, that he could not have a copy of the letter that he had apparently signed.

I wrote to the agency in February, requesting a copy of that letter. More than a month later on 27 March, I chased the agency, and in the meantime Mr. Dalleywater received a summons to appear in court on 18 April. Despite repeated requests, he had not received an account summary to show how his arrears had been calculated. On 17 April, the CSA relented and let Mr. Dalleywater know that he could have a copy of his alleged letter, providing he wrote again to ask for it. We were told that the CSA was preparing an account summary, which of course prompts the question of how it intended to proceed with a court case without that vital piece of information.

On 30 May, I received a delightful letter from the CSA, featuring "sorry" five times. It apologised for the unhelpfulness shown to Mr. Dalleywater during the CSA's dealings with him. Although the sentiment is appreciated, it has not and does not clear up Mr. Dalleywater's case. It is heartening that the disputed letter, of which Mr. Dalleywater finally saw a copy, has been passed to the criminal investigation team; however, the accompanying account breakdown indicated that Mr. Dalleywater owed not £5,413.51, but a staggering £18,094.57. One could not make it up. The CSA was gracious enough to admit that there was a slight discrepancy—in that instance to the tune of a mere £12,681.06. Court proceedings were therefore adjourned until the correct figures were ascertained. One can only imagine what the judge would have said if the agency had turned up with such unreliable figures.

Finally, on 6 July, we received a response stating that Mr. Dalleywater's total arrears were actually £513.58. How the CSA was able to calculate such wildly different sums—with impunity and claim them all as gospel—is totally beyond me, and no doubt the rest of the House. The letter of 6 July explains the various and tortured routes that the Minister's staff in the CSA took to arrive at such staggeringly different amounts—in the process, wasting time and taxpayers' hard-earned money with their efforts.

I have written eight letters and made seven phone calls on behalf of Mr. Dalleywater, and although many CSA staff members have tried to be helpful, there are clearly deep and perhaps insurmountable problems in that faceless and creaking bureaucracy. The only part of the agency that seems to be able to function is the arm that takes people to court. David Dalleywater, like Sonia Poulton, feels that the CSA has treated his case appallingly. He was unable to obtain either direct answers to his questions from CSA staff, or indeed a copy of a letter that the CSA claimed he wrote in 2004.

I am sure that the Minister will be well aware of the CSA's website statement that the agency can help to

"ensure parents who live apart from their children contribute financially to their upkeep...work out who should pay and how much...make sure more children receive the maintenance they are entitled to...take quick and firm action to make sure payments get ma[illegible]"

It has failed to fulfil any of those tasks. The Home Office, on its own admission of no less a celebrated and illustrious source than the former Home Secretary, has been declared "not fit for purpose". However, on the strength of these two cases, it seems that the Child Support Agency is not even fit to open an envelope.

The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, now the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, declared a year ago that the CSA would be abolished. He said:

"These reforms will address the fundamental flaws in the current system." —[*Official Report*, 24 July 2006; Vol. 449, c. 602.]

Goodbye to that unhappy agency, to the "troubled history" of the CSA, flawed from day one.

I ask the Minister sincerely not only to abolish the CSA, but to give me some firm pledges today that those two cases will be resolved rapidly, so that the children, particularly, and the parents who have custody of them, receive the money that they deserve.

1.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mrs. Anne McGuire): I am delighted to reply to the debate that the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) has secured. He has been a doughty fighter on behalf of his constituents, and he and his constituency team have spent a considerable amount of time on the two cases that he has raised. I regret the fact that we are discussing them, because they were not handled in the manner that Child Support Agency clients are entitled to expect.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept my sincere apologies. He suggested that he might be fed up with "sorry", but I genuinely apologise for the situation that arose. He is entirely right to be angry and annoyed about what has happened. He recognises that, coincidentally, upstairs in Committee we are considering the Bill that will replace the Child Support Agency with the new commission. I have come down from that Committee to answer this debate.

With the hon. Gentleman's permission, and with yours, Mr. Hood, first, I shall run through each case from the agency's perspective, not to offer excuses, but to lay out the issues that he has highlighted, to explain what we are putting in place to ensure that such cases are dealt with properly in the future, and to give him some comfort concerning the situations that he raised. The hon. Gentleman knows that Mr. Dalleywater's case is one of a small number in which both parents have a maintenance liability. In a common-sense situation, those liabilities could have been offset against each other, but under current legislation, two maintenance calculations are required, and maintenance is then collected from both parents.

Regrettably, those claims are complex, and unfortunately almost all counter-claims—one parent against another—result in an IT system malfunction. The case is now being dealt with by the agency's clerical office at Bolton, and I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has some strong views about that office. We established it as a new unit to deal with all clerical cases that, owing to technical issues with our IT system, could not be progressed through the agency's system. Under the operational improvement plan, the remaining faults with the IT system are due to be resolved throughout 2007.

Mr. Dalleywater's assessment will now be made clerically, and again, I sincerely apologise for the events that led to his complaint. Our Bolton centre is now urgently considering his case, including backdating. It hopes to resolve all outstanding issues as soon as humanly possible, and I give the hon. Gentleman my personal reassurance that I shall keep on the tail of that case until it is resolved. The current treatment of cases such as Mr Dalleywater's is inefficient, and it leads to complaints when the agency successfully collects maintenance from one parent but not from the other.

The measures in the new Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill mean that, although the commission will continue to make two statutory maintenance calculations, the lower amount will be offset against the higher. Offsetting statutory maintenance liabilities in such cases makes sense, as the hon. Gentleman will agree, and it will bring about the more efficient use of resources, because there will be only one maintenance liability to collect. In the case of Mr. Dalleywater, such a system would have helped to reduce much of the existing administrative complications that contributed to the complaint. However, in his case, there were some complicating factors that added to the situation.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the letter that was allegedly from Mr. Dalleywater, and I find it amazing that he was not allowed to see that letter without the hon. Gentleman's precise intervention. That issue will be remedied. One cannot accuse someone of writing a letter, and then refuse to allow them to see the letter that they deny ever writing. The hon. Gentleman's intervention was helpful in resolving that situation.

I now move on to the case of Sonia Poulton, a parent with care who, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, has had a tumultuous relationship with the agency since she applied for maintenance in 1998. In the years leading up to the complaint, Ms Poulton's maintenance payments

[Mrs. Anne McGuire]

were disrupted on numerous occasions by the agency's administrative failings. Again, I offer no excuse, and can only apologise. Arrears owed to Ms Poulton built up during that time, but agency miscalculations resulted in confusion about the total payable.

On 7 December 2006, Ms Poulton received a payment of £1,556, significantly less than she had been expecting after her discussions with the CSA. That provoked the current complaint. The case is now being processed clerically at our Bolton centre, where I understand it is a high priority. Once again, I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep on the tail of this case until it is resolved.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful for how the Minister is handling the two cases and for the explanations that she is giving me, but she said that both cases would go clerical. That has happened before. What reassurance can she give me that they will not get lost in the system again? How long does she expect the clerical process to take before the cases are resolved?

Mrs. McGuire: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept my personal commitment to ensuring that the cases are dealt with as expeditiously as possible, the correct calculations are made and the correct information is given to his constituents. I could stand here and say that the cases will be done by the end of tomorrow's business, but I think he understands why I do not want to do so. I expect the situation to be resolved in a short time. As I said, I do not want to be tied down to a day; he has my reassurance that I shall not give a commitment today that I am not prepared to see fulfilled by the Child Support Agency and the Bolton office. Maybe that is being a hostage to fortune, but I do not think so. I hope that he will accept that in the faith in which it is given.

As I said earlier, processing clerically will slow down resolution somewhat, although it should not slow it down as much as the hon. Gentleman suggested. I have received reassurance in Ms Poulton's case that maintenance contribution deductions from the non-resident parent's benefits will start as urgently as possible. I have alluded to our progress in transferring clerical cases back to the IT system. It is anticipated that all clerical cases will be transferred during 2008 and 2009. I appreciate that as Ms Poulton's case started in 1998, that time scale may seem horrendous, but her case will be dealt with separately. The agency has made further consolatory payments, including reimbursement of Ms Poulton's bank charges, which I understand were significant and were incurred as a result of the breakdown of payments to her. The agency is preparing new accounts to calculate the non-resident parent's new arrears balance.

Again, I apologise for all the inconvenience caused by the agency in those cases, and I fully recognise that significant underperformance occurred. I accept that a catalogue of unacceptable errors led to the situation between Ms Poulton and the agency. However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognises that the main issues in both cases—enforcement, dual cases and clerical processing—are being addressed through the agency's operational improvement plan. We aim to make further improvements to the scheme's structure through the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill, which is being considered in Committee. I thank the hon. Gentleman and his constituents for bringing the cases to the House's attention, and I hope that they are reassured by what I have said and what we have discussed.

I shall highlight some of the improvements that have been and are being made. The Child Support Agency has not performed to the standard that its clients should expect since its inception; the hon. Gentleman quoted the previous Secretary of State's comments recognising that. As a result, we approved the operational improvement plan, which was launched in March 2006, to improve substantially the service offered by the agency.

The plan's effects can be seen in the most recent quarterly summary of statistics. Case clearance times have improved—55 per cent. of cases are now cleared within six weeks, and the number of uncleared cases fell by 12 per cent. between September 2006 and March 2007. The agency has also made significant progress in resolving the IT difficulties that have compounded problems in the hon. Gentleman's constituents' cases. The most serious defects in its IT systems have been resolved, and the remaining defects are due to be corrected later this year.

The hon. Gentleman was very critical of our Bolton office, but it is now processing more than 35,000 clerical cases. He is right that there were some initial troubles, due largely to the transfer of so much complex work from one organisation to another. However, the Bolton office has now made more than £17.5 million in payments to parents with care and is working hard to get more money to more children as soon as possible. Although I apologise unreservedly for the delays in the cases that he described, we are working hard with the Bolton office to improve substantially and as quickly as possible the service that we offer our clients.

We are also aware that the agency in general and the Bolton office in particular have not provided as satisfactory a level of customer service as we could wish. Under the operational improvement plan, the agency is dedicated to improving client service. A wholesale review of communications, of which the hon. Gentleman was highly critical, is well under way, and noticeable improvements have been made to the agency's telephony system and service. The operational improvement plan is an important platform on which to build and implement further and more radical changes to the child maintenance system envisaged in the new Bill.

As the House is aware, the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 5 June 2007. It is the next stage in implementing the far-reaching proposals for child maintenance reform set out in the December 2006 White Paper following Sir David Henshaw's recommendations. It is important that we establish a system that truly delivers for the parents and children who depend on it.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Minister has given a very reasonable explanation of what the agency is doing, but can she give the House a flavour of how many of the most difficult cases occur in a year? Are they decreasing or not? As for the number of cases in clerical processing, to which the two cases have been added, is it increasing or decreasing?

Mrs. McGuire: The latest report from the quarterly summary of statistics indicates an improvement. We hope that that improvement will continue, and the proof of the pudding will be in the next set of quarterly statistics. As for the breakdown of numbers, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not having it to hand, but I shall arrange for that information to be given to him.

The hon. Gentleman has helped us focus on the fact that we need a child maintenance system that responds to the child's needs and can cope with the complexities that can occur during relationship breakdowns between parents. I was astonished by the complexity of the networks, links and information gathering used in dealing with quite straightforward cases. As he illustrated, his cases are that much more complex, resulting in the problems that he described. That is no excuse, however, for such inefficiency. People should have made the difference in determining the outcome for the individual.

I hope that with my reassurances, the hon. Gentleman will see a resolution to his constituents' circumstances. Once again, I can only apologise that he has had to bring the cases to the House, and for the inconvenience, distress and anguish caused to his constituents.

Ireland and the Commonwealth

1.30 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I am pleased to initiate this debate on Ireland's membership of the Commonwealth—a business that stands deferred since April 1949. As I hope to demonstrate in the next few minutes, ministerial responsibility has been involved.

You, Mr. Hood, and I are proud of the Commonwealth, which has 53 sovereign, independent member states, only 16 of which have Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. I shall refer to that again, because it is important to place on the record that the overwhelming majority of Commonwealth members are republics.

I am proud of the fact that the Commonwealth is an informal, mutually owned organisation that does an awful lot of good around the world—somewhat silently, but to the tremendous benefit of millions of people. Each Commonwealth country is responsible for its own policies, but they all work together in consultation and co-operation in the interests of their people. They try to reduce conflict and are involved in conflict prevention and bringing peace to the world.

The Commonwealth's strength is in its diversity and geographical extent—rich and poor, developed and undeveloped, north and south. Commonwealth countries' common factors include a common language, in many cases, as well as history and democratic values. Such values are the cornerstone of the Commonwealth and are enshrined in the Singapore declaration of Commonwealth principles, made in 1971 and reiterated at Harare in 1991.

The Commonwealth works closely with and in the spirit of the United Nations charter. Many organisations are related to Commonwealth agencies, including the Commonwealth Development Corporation and the scientific and education organisations. Many of us are proud of what is probably the second biggest single festival of sport—the Commonwealth games, which are very important to all the participants and countries involved.

That is the background to the Commonwealth of which you and I are very proud, Mr. Hood. However, in my mind's eye, each time there is a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, or CHOGM, there is an empty chair, in front of which is a notice bearing the words "Republic of Ireland". Why do I use the empty-chair analogy? To me, an empty chair indicates the temporary absence of an occupant who will return, or that the attendance of the person for whom the chair is designated has been delayed.

I use the analogy because historians, both in the Republic of Ireland and here, say—erroneously, in my view—that Ireland left the Commonwealth when Taoiseach John Costello decided in August 1948 to repeal the Executive Authority (External Relations) Act 1936 and inaugurate the Republic of Ireland on Easter Monday 1949.

However, I think that the historians are wrong: at that time, the Commonwealth, to the extent that it existed, was nothing like the Commonwealth of today. Its only sovereign, independent states in April 1949 were Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, apart from Ireland. The Commonwealth of the time bore no relationship to that of today. There is also the backdrop: at the time, all but Eire had been involved in

[Andrew Mackinlay]

what was then the recent second world war. Relations between not only Ireland and the United Kingdom, but those other states were still somewhat fraught—something epitomised by the exchanges of Winston Churchill and Eamon De Valera in their two great broadcasts of May 1945.

However, things have moved on, and I raise this matter today in that spirit. It is also important to remember that, paradoxically, some of the great Irish statesmen have contributed to the modern Commonwealth. One is Eamon De Valera, who in 1921 came up with the concept of external association. At the time, the British Government could not get their heads around the idea that a state could be associated with those other states, with their historic ties and traditions, and yet be a republic. Valera's document No. 2 in the treaty negotiations of 1921 was spurned and rejected.

However, it came alive again five days after the Republic of Ireland was inaugurated by Taoiseach Costello in April 1949, because on 22, 25 and 26 April that year, the Prime Ministers of the remaining countries of what was then called the Commonwealth agreed that in 1950 Pandit Nehru could bring his newly independent India into the Commonwealth as its first republic.

De Valera's concept of external association was adopted, but unfortunately those dealing with relations with Ireland could not get their heads around the idea that that formulation for India should have been triggered for Ireland in 1948-49. The rest is history; as I have said, the majority of Commonwealth countries take advantage of the concept and are republics within the Commonwealth.

I have mentioned Eamon De Valera, but his adversaries in the Irish domestic situation also contributed greatly to the modern Commonwealth. I refer particularly to Desmond Fitzgerald—father of Garret Fitzgerald—Kevin O'Higgins and Patrick McGilligan. In the dominion conferences of the '20s and '30s—after the creation of the Irish Free State and with the support of W.T. Cosgrave, the Free State Premier—those men tried to stretch the envelope of their independence and enthusiastically interested the other countries in doing so.

The Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921 stated that the Irish Free State would have the same status as Canada's. That was seized by the plenipotentiaries who signed that treaty, but they went on to try to increase and build on it. They argued and persuaded Canada and Australia to seek greater independence; that was reflected in legislation such as the Royal and Parliamentary Titles Act 1927. However, the culmination was the Statute of Westminster 1931, which is still the cornerstone of the independence of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries.

When Eamon De Valera came into office in 1932, he was able to abolish the oath. On the occasion of the abdication, he was able to alter the Irish Free State's head of state position—he did away with the post of Governor-General, created the office of President, and moved things on a ratchet towards a republic, which he desired and for which he had a mandate. He also introduced the Executive Authority (External Relations) Act 1936, which reduced the role of the monarch to a residual one, by which diplomatic representation was notionally done through the King and the signing of treaties. In every other respect, Ireland had moved to being a republic, although it was not declared as such.

I have given that history because when we come to 1948-49 there was the apparent breach that I mentioned. As I said, the formula extended to Pandit Nehru was unfortunately not extended to, offered to or taken up by Ireland, although in retrospect it should have been. I do not think that it is too late for that to happen.

It is also interesting that Clement Attlee was somewhat exercised by the Taoiseach Costello declaration. However, he had the good counsel of the Canadian External Affairs Minister, the great Lester Pearson, and that of Prime Ministers Chifley of Australia and Fraser of New Zealand. My predecessor, the late, great Hugh Delargy, MP for Thurrock, helped persuade the British Government to pass the Ireland Act 1949, which decided not to treat Irish men and women as aliens, but to give them special status, which they enjoy today. I should say in parenthesis that as a consequence, many Members of this House of Commons hold Irish citizenship or are entitled to; some Ministers do, I think.

A special relationship was created, anyway, but the terminology was not such that that Ireland was in the Commonwealth and, as I have said, that was followed by non-attendance at Commonwealth councils, at CHOGM and so on, which I regret. It should have been, as the spirit was that the franchise was as available to people of the Republic of Ireland as it was to citizens of the United Kingdom.

By the mid-1950s, Ireland had joined the United Nations under External Affairs Minister Frank Aiken and since then it has not only been a great player in the United Nations but has been great friends of the Secretary-General, particularly using its small but highly skilled armed forces in the delicate matter of peace operations. It has contributed enormously to that, and I mention it because part of the role of the Commonwealth is peace, conflict prevention, keeping potential adversaries apart and trying to keep safety. Of course, Ireland has had a distinguished role in the European Union. It has held the presidency very successfully on a number of occasions. Ireland has a small population, but with great professionalism it punches above its weight in the United Nations, the European Union and many other councils. The missing element in my view, to our disadvantage, is its lack of membership of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is run by a small secretariat. It is not the British Commonwealth, but the Commonwealth—it has not been the British Commonwealth for decades. Its secretary-general has never been drawn from the United Kingdom: the present one is a former and distinguished Foreign Minister of New Zealand. I hope and think that one day the natural supply for the role of secretary-general would be professional diplomats from the Irish Republic or even a retired Taoiseach who has done so much to bring peace in our islands and throughout the world.

What do I want from the debate? I trust that it will not be seen as presumptuous, but I hope that the United Kingdom branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association might reflect on what I have said and extend invitations to members of the Oireachtas to any of its future conferences. It might also raise the issue in the international conference of the CPA. I hope that both the secretary-general of the CPA and the secretary-general of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon, will also take on board some of my remarks.

I hope that the high commissioners in London of the Commonwealth countries, particularly those of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, because of their historic role and because so many of their fellow countrymen and women are part of the Irish diaspora—the Irish diaspora are in every corner of the Commonwealth, playing a full part in business commerce and public life—will reflect on what I have said. I hope that the Irish embassy in London will reflect on what I have said. I hope that it will not be too presumptuous to ask the Minister if—if I can persuade him that I have a case— to refer the matter to our Prime Minister. We are in a new era of relationships. I do not say that this should come about because of the Good Friday agreement and the success of 8 May this year, with the new dispensation for north and south, Catholic and Protestant, republican and Unionist. The time is right for Ireland to take its place in the club in which it has not taken up its seat.

This case needs to be remedied. I hope that those countries that are not independent sovereign states in the Commonwealth, such as our friends in the Isle of Man, might discuss the matter in their legislatures. At least they can use their good offices to invite, particularly the Isle of Man, which shares the Celtic, Viking heritage of the Republic of Ireland and whose language was rescued by Eamon De Valera in the early 1950s. I hope that everyone will reflect on the point.

This is not the first time that I have raised this point. I raised it with a Minister a long time ago—not this Minister. That Minister was a mediocre one, who pompously said, "It is a matter for the Irish Republic to apply." That made me very cross, and still does today. I know that we will get a different response, however. One of the things that all organisations do—it does not matter if they are the Boy Scouts, the Townswomen's Guilds, the Reform Club or a workingmen's club—is to extend invitations to people who they think can contribute and whose presence would be valuable. They do it as a way of extending to those people their respect for them. That is why I think that an invitation should be extended to the Irish Republic.

There might be a residual one or two people who do not think that such an invitation ought not to come from the United Kingdom. So be it. Let this Minister say that he will work with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the Caribbean countries and the countries around the world to see whether they should take the initiative of inviting the Irish Republic to take its natural place in the Commonwealth of nations.

1.45 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Jim Murphy): I am delighted to appear before you, Mr. Hood, for the second time today on a matter of great importance to the House. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) not only on securing the debate, but, more significantly, on the way in which he made his case.

My hon. Friend will remember that he and I shared a portakabin, which masqueraded as an office, on the roof of the Palace of Westminster for five years. We spent many a long evening—

Andrew Mackinlay: You've done better than me, though. *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order.

Mr. Murphy: We spent many long evenings talking about many different issues. If only I had known about my hon. Friend's interest in and passion for this subject, it would have saved us a huge number of other less riveting debates and conversations on which we were unable to find any great unanimity.

My hon. Friend's comments encourage me finally to get round to reading a book that I bought some time ago, an Attlee book. I think its proper title is "Empire into Commonwealth". My hon. Friend referred to Clem Attlee, and I shall undertake to read it over the summer recess. Whether it will make me less or more mediocre, I am uncertain, but I shall read that work of Attlee's.

My hon. Friend was right to refer to the fact that many Members owe some affection to Ireland. I remember growing up and thinking about whether I would play international football for Scotland or Ireland; I then realised that it was not an issue of nationality but a rank failure of any ability that meant that I was incapable of playing for either of those two great nations.

I should start by formally putting on the record Her Majesty's Government's welcome to the new ambassador to the United Kingdom from Ireland, Mr. David Cooney, who started work yesterday, I believe. I look forward to meeting him and discussing the many different issues that commonly concern us.

I offer my next observation with a sense of great trepidation. My notes say that I should say, first of all, that it is of course for the Government of Ireland to decide whether or not they wish to join the Commonwealth. That was a prophetically drafted first sentence. However, perhaps I could add an additional comfort for my hon. Friend that although it is not for the UK to invite a new member to the Commonwealth, as he implicitly acknowledged when he said that at one time it was Britain's Commonwealth but that it is now a collection of states that share a common sense of values, the Prime Minister will discuss possible new membership criteria for the Commonwealth with his fellow heads of Government at the next CHOGM. That might offer some hope to my hon. Friend, although I understand that it does not capture the kind of thing that he is talking about. It is largely about whether there is consensus on the sort of membership criteria that allow countries without a constitutional link, such as Rwanda and others, to apply to join the Commonwealth.

Let me set out some of the areas where we have close co-operation with Ireland while it remains outside the Commonwealth, and say a few more words about that. My hon. Friend is right that there was a degree of excitement and speculation about possible Irish membership of the Commonwealth after the recent visit by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I do not know whether the Irish Government intend to join the Commonwealth, or even whether they are considering that step. Nothing that I have seen or read suggests that to be the case.

As he said, Ireland left the Commonwealth in the 1940s because it wanted to make a decisive break with Britain's colonial past. India faced a similar choice but took an entirely different route. As a result, the modern Commonwealth was born. The UK understands the motivations of both countries in taking those decisions, but, now as then, they must themselves decide on their relationships with the Commonwealth. I hope today to show that, since that decision to leave in the 1940s,

[Mr. Jim Murphy]

Ireland, the Commonwealth and the UK's relationship with both have evolved and improved.

The Commonwealth would find the Ireland of today not just prosperous but booming, with an economy and a culture that is the envy of many. That is clear to any of us who visit Ireland on official visits, although I have not had the opportunity to do so recently, or who go to Donegal, as many of us do and as I do in my annual holiday. Over the years, the transformation of that part of Ireland has been remarkable and is emblematic of the transformation that continues across Ireland.

Equally Ireland, in its assessment of the Commonwealth, would share my hon. Friend's perception that it has changed unrecognisably. It has come of age based on values, not on some historical relationship. Ireland would be unlikely to see any traces of colonialism and would instead see a modern, vibrant and international organisation, as he eloquently said.

Many nations are keen to join the Commonwealth, because it brings together states because of who they are, not what they want. It spans divides of wealth and size, as my hon. Friend said, and its members share a cultural and emotional bond and strong people-to-people links. More than 80 Commonwealth organisations link groups of people such as nurses, young people, lawyers and many others. The Commonwealth gives all its members an equal voice and, as he alluded to, is a unique forum in which to be heard. It is a forum where Asia and Africa can meet and learn from each other, where small island states have as much influence as anyone else and where developed and developing countries and emerging powers such as India can find common ground. Its members span all five continents and are all committed to the democratic values set out in the Harare declaration. Tolerance, justice and democracy are the Commonwealth's guiding principles, and it keeps to them, suspending members who fail to respect Commonwealth values.

We have a unique relationship with Ireland, based on our shared history. Were it to happen, Irish membership of the Commonwealth would provide a new context for that relationship.

Andrew Mackinlay: I assume that the answer to this question will be "yes". Would my hon. Friend the Minister welcome Ireland's interest in returning to the Commonwealth, or taking up its seat in the Commonwealth, as I do not actually accept that it left?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend successfully had a guess at my response. If Ireland were to choose to apply to join the Commonwealth, it would have much to contribute in the ways that he has said: its skill and expertise in diplomatic arenas and the way in which it is outward-facing and has so much to contribute, as it has shown over many years. I know that he would expect me to add the comment that it is not for the UK to initiate an application, it is for Ireland itself to come to a decision if it chooses to do so.

Andrew Mackinlay: I am sorry to be a nuisance, but I said that I hoped my hon. Friend would discuss the matter with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other players in the Commonwealth, because it might be appropriate for them to take the initiative.

Mr. Murphy: Of course that may be appropriate. My hon. Friend is not being a nuisance; having spent five years with him on that roof top I can say that on some occasions he was a nuisance, but not today. But in trying to offer him hope on that specific point I say to him that, if Ireland were to make an application, we would of course enter into discussions and debate about specifics, timings and so on.

My hon. Friend's introductory comments were fascinating. We have all listened to hundreds of speeches in the House, and I know that my hon. Friend does not welcome false praise, but his speech was one of the most interesting that I have had the opportunity to listen to in the past four or five years I hope that he takes that in the spirit in which I offer it.

On our close co-operation, there has been landmark progress in Northern Ireland, as we all know, which has led to the re-establishment of the devolved Executive there. I remember watching the rugby match at Croke Park between England and Ireland and cheering—I shall not say who for, but it was a good afternoon's rugby—and witnessing a Taoiseach address both Houses of Parliament for the first time ever earlier this year. I agree completely with the Taoiseach's words in that address that

"the relationship between Britain and Ireland has changed fundamentally for the better".

We now have an effective relationship with Ireland, both bilaterally through the institutions of the Belfast agreement, including the British-Irish Council, and internationally, notably through the EU and the UN, as my hon. Friend said.

The UK and Ireland recognise that in an ever more connected world, being active internationally is the best option for shared prosperity and progress on the global stage. If Ireland decided to join the Commonwealth, it would find a forum to discuss and pursue issues of international development, trade and climate change without the traditional north-south fault lines that have characterised so many conversations in the past. Ireland would have an enormous amount to contribute to those conversations.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the Commonwealth is a modern organisation that provides the UK and all its members, on an equal basis, with the opportunity to find common solutions to common problems. Contrary to some assertions, it is far from seeing itself as a rival to the EU. That is an important point. In fact, both organisations are engaged in common work in Africa, for example, and hope to extend that joint work further. The UK, like Cyprus and Malta, finds membership of both organisations valuable.

We welcome our international co-operation with Ireland and look forward to even greater engagement in the coming years on global issues of concern to all our peoples. While I cannot offer my hon. Friend the specific good news that he wishes for, everyone in the House knows how dogged and determined he can be. Ministers sometimes welcome it and occasionally they welcome it a little less, but dogged and determined he is, and often successful. The only suggestion that I make to him is that, having raised the issue here in the House, he raises it with the many good friends that he undoubtedly has in Ireland. It is in Ireland that any application to join the Commonwealth must originate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 July 2007

[HUGH BAYLEY *in the Chair*]

Russia

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Khan.]*

9.30 am

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Bayley, and good morning to everyone. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the important issue of UK relations with Russia. Recent weeks have shown that this subject is very much on the minds of the Government, Her Majesty's Opposition and many hon. Members. For the record, I am the chairman of the all-party group on Russia.

Despite the events of the past few weeks, there is more to unite than divide the United Kingdom and Russia, and it is important to start the debate on that note. Currently, the UK and Russia co-operate on a range of important international issues, such as nuclear non-proliferation, climate change—both countries are, of course, Kyoto signatories—and people trafficking. Russia is also a key member of the middle east Quartet, and is a member of the G8 and the UN Security Council. In many of those international bodies there is good co-operation between the two countries, and long may that continue. I hope that relations will soon be restored on the important issue of co-operation on counter-terrorism.

One certainty on which I hope that we can all agree today is that organisations such as al-Qaeda are as much a threat to Russian interests and the way of life of ordinary Russians as they are to UK citizens. I hope that the Minister will comment on how quickly he feels we will be able to restore co-operation on the important issue of counter-terrorism and intelligence gathering and sharing.

The other key issue is trade. Russia and the United Kingdom are doing more trade than ever before. Twenty years ago, trade was minimal, but 400 UK companies now operate in Russia. In the first three months of this year, the UK invested $3.1 billion in Russia, and last year bilateral trade was around $10 billion to $12 billion. Those who watch the City will know that there are currently $13 billion-worth of stocks in Russian companies on the London stock exchange and the alternative investment market. In fact, about 42 Russian companies are listed on both exchanges. Later this year, the Rusal mining company will hopefully be listed in London. It is important that London remain the place where many Russian companies want to raise their finance and capital because there are other continental competitors.

The last few months and weeks have been dominated by the case of the sad and tragic death of Alexander Litvinenko. His death was tragic and sinister in equal measure, and his killers deserve to be brought to justice. It is completely unacceptable that anyone should be murdered in such a way: with a nuclear toxin on British soil, which also put other UK nationals at risk. That put extreme danger on to the streets of London and I hope that we will soon be able to resolve the current impasse and bring the main suspect before the courts. I will return to that later.

More recently, it was alleged that somebody was sent from Russia apparently to assassinate a political dissident who is resident in the UK. If somebody was allegedly prevented from doing so, it is a great mystery that they were not arrested. The charge suggested by the police through the newspapers was that of conspiracy to murder. If it was known that a person was going to attempt to kill a Russian dissident living in London, why were they not arrested, subsequently charged and brought before the courts? A court date should certainly have been given. Why was the person supposedly allowed to return to Russia? It seems contradictory that we are asking for a Russian national who is suspected of murder to be extradited, while at the same time releasing a Russian national in London about whom we have evidence of involvement in a conspiracy to murder. I hope that the Minister will comment on that.

The Litvinenko case raises the issue of political dissidents of whatever nationality living in the United Kingdom. It is not acceptable for such people to endanger UK citizens through things that they might do or say. If we can have acceptable behaviour contracts for people who graffiti our towns and villages, we could at least have some sort of behaviour contracts for political dissidents. It is extraordinary that many of those people are increasingly abusing the good faith and trust put in them and using the political asylum system as a cover from which they will often make unhelpful comments about other nations. It is unacceptable that certain political dissidents in this country have called for the violent overthrow of a democratically elected Government, even if the integrity of the democratic election in Russia seven years ago is questionable. Nevertheless, the Government were democratically elected and it is absolutely wrong that President Putin should be put in the position of having somebody in London calling for his violent overthrow.

A further point is that of extradition. Again, it appears slightly contradictory that the Russian Government have asked for the extradition of 21 people from the United Kingdom and, as I understand it, not one of those requests has been granted, and yet the UK is demanding the extradition of the main suspect in the Litvinenko case. I hope that the Minister will comment on that.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not trying to draw some kind of moral equivalence between the extradition requests from Russia and from Britain. The truth is that when the extradition of Mr. Zakayev was sought by the Russian authorities, the British judge, who acted on an entirely independent basis and had nothing to do with the Government, pointed out that one of the reasons why his extradition was being sought was that he was meant to have murdered a Russian Orthodox priest. The Russian Orthodox priest concerned gave evidence in the case to point out that he had not been murdered.

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, but that was not one of the cases to which I was referring.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is important because Britain has a well-established process under which extradition is operated that is independent of the Executive. The decision is made by the courts on the balance of evidence put before them. There is a world of difference between that and the case of Mr. Lugovoy, in which it was a decision of the Executive in Russia to refuse even to contemplate extradition. We in the House of Commons ought at least to say that we have faith in our court processes.

Mark Pritchard: I do have faith in our court process—certainly a lot more than I have in the Russian court process. I am merely asking questions; I am not necessarily stating a position in the comments that I have made thus far. This is a debate, and I think that it is right that such questions be raised. Certainly, some people have commented to me on the contradiction.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of law and, in particular, extradition law. Again, it seems rather puzzling that the Government have asked for the extradition of the main suspect in the Litvinenko case, Mr. Lugovoy, knowing full well that the Russian constitution forbids the extradition of Russian citizens. It might be said that Russia could just change its constitution, but could it? How easy would that be? Basically, to change the Russian constitution, two votes in Parliament and a national referendum would be required. I think that, 18 months ago, some pro-Putin MPs suggested that the Russian constitution be changed to allow President Putin to serve a third term. That was refused. Even if Putin himself wanted to extradite Mr. Lugovoy, he could not because the Russian constitution forbids it.

I am a supporter and fan of the Foreign Office, but am puzzled by the discussions that must have gone on in the Minister's office. Why ask Russia for something that clearly it could not deliver? Would it not have been more sensible to ask Russia—robustly even—for something that might cause it a little diplomatic pain but could at least be delivered? If the British Government continue to ask for the extradition of Mr. Lugovoy, we will not make progress where it is needed. Clearly, as I have said, the Russians cannot change their constitution unless it is voted on twice by Parliament and followed by a national referendum.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that even if the constitution could be, and were, changed, it would not accord with our principles of the rule of law for it to be applied retrospectively?

Mark Pritchard: As always, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I would add that we should put the shoe on the other foot. If the United Kingdom was in the same position, would we change our constitution over a murder suspect? I suspect not. Of course, there is also a big difference because we do not have a written constitution, whereas the Russians do. That is an important legal point that follows on from the comments of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

I shall return to Russian political dissidents and one gentleman in particular living in London for whom, in the last 10 days, I understand, an arrest warrant has been issued by a Brazilian judge over allegations of money laundering and other crimes. Will the Minister put on the record whether a formal extradition request has been made by the Brazilian authorities for Mr. Berezovsky? It would, again, seem contradictory if the UK Government said no, at the same time as asking for the extradition of Mr. Lugovoy from Russia. I hope that if that request has arrived or is to arrive, the UK Government will assist our close ally and friend, Brazil, with its extradition request. I think that that would be very helpful because it would send out a clear message that the British public are sick and tired of having to pay for the cover of many of these people.

We have heard about close protection. Forgive me for raising quite a few questions, but will the Minister tell us who is paying for the close protection of those whose lives are apparently under threat? Is it the British taxpayer or the individuals themselves? My constituents in Shropshire are more interested in protecting their streets and their homes from burglars, than in paying for the close police protection of political dissidents who perhaps could be a little more circumspect in what they say. I think that it would be rather surprising, given the scarce resources of the Metropolitan police, to find that armed, or even unarmed, protection is being given to such people.

I hope that soon we can find a third or middle way to deal with Mr. Lugovoy—the main suspect in the Litvinenko case. That is how I started today and it remains my position. What about having a court in Russia, with a Russian, British and an independent third-country judge? Or what about a court hearing in a third country, again with a Russian, UK and an independent judge? A range of options are available that might allow someone to be brought to justice for this vicious and cruel crime and provide the Russian Government with a way of getting round the legal point on the constitution. I hope that the Minister will comment on that.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is putting forward some interesting suggestions, but does he share my concern about the quality and independence of the Russian judiciary? Does he recognise the comments of the chairman of the Russian constitutional court, which were reported in *Izvestiya* in October 2004? He said that

"the country's judicial system is in many aspects worse now than it was in the Soviet era",

and that, in reality, people who try to take a case to the European Court of Human Rights, for example, find that mysteriously their legal advisers are arrested or disappear. As a result they are intimidated when trying to take such cases forward. How can we have any confidence in a justice system that is so manipulative?

Mark Pritchard: There is no doubt that there is a great deal of need for improvement in the Russian judicial system. Some might say, however, that the same applies, although not on the same scale, to the UK judicial system and that some of our judges are completely out of touch with reality when they hand down laughable sentences for quite serious crimes. That is not a fair comparison, but I wanted to put it on the record. In defence of the British judiciary, if we had a British judge, alongside a Russian judge and an independent judge, those challenges could be overcome.

I am very glad that, in the last few days, the Russian Foreign Minister has stated that Russia would like to see the normalisation of relations with the United Kingdom. That is to be welcomed. I think that the Russians could have done a lot more than expel the four UK diplomats. I am glad that they did not, and I hope that we can now move on. If a third, middle or independent way cannot be found to bring Mr. Lugovoy before the courts, what will the Government's position be? Will more Russian diplomats be expelled or will we sit around the table and find a way forward?

Over the next few weeks, the UK Government need to work with Russia on some key issues, one of which is Kosovo, on which I hope that the Russians will not use their veto. I hope also that Prime Minister Çeku of Kosovo will not use Albanian independence day to declare unilateral independence for Kosovo. That would be unhelpful. I must say, however, that it was also very unhelpful of the US President to declare Kosovo de facto independent. We need far more robust evidence of United Nations resolution criteria being implemented in Kosovo. A mutual agreement is needed on Kosovo. I am very concerned that the previous agreement on the region is starting to come apart. It is important that that does not happen, but Russia must play its part and not use its veto in the United Nations.

Another issue is missile defence. The Russians and the Americans have been discussing a possible joint venture in Azerbaijan. I am not talking about the Polish or Czech ballistic missile shield. Nevertheless, our relationship with Russia indirectly affects, on occasion the relationship that the United States might have or seek to have with Russia. On ballistic missile defence, it is important that nothing that the British Government do over the next few weeks and months unsettles the discussions that are going on with regard to Azerbaijan and the potential for partnership.

The other key issue is Iran. Russia, being a key ally of Iran, is a key player. We need to ensure that we work closely with Russia on that.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Rhondda is present, because he amended early-day motion 1424, about human rights and freedom of speech in Russia, which was originally tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski). The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that Russia needs to do far more to protect its religious minorities, get off the backs of non-governmental organisations and promote equal rights. I saw the scenes in Moscow some weeks ago. The physical and brutal attacks on homosexuals were completely unacceptable. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will comment on his research on human rights in Russia, because I know that he has done a lot of work on that.

It is also completely unacceptable that journalists continue to be killed. If Russia wants to be taken seriously in the international bodies that I have mentioned and if it wants the west to have new engagement, many of these issues must be addressed. They are not soft issues; they go to the very heart of how a country thinks and operates. I hope that the Minister shares my concern about the number of journalists who have been murdered and will comment on that.

There is, however, a future, which is a post-Putin future. I understand that President Putin is going off to Sochi to run the winter Olympics, which the Russians have just won; he will oversee that project. I hope that, somewhere in the Foreign Office, people will be discussing a post-Putin relationship with Russia. On that overarching umbrella point, I would be interested to hear what the UK's position is vis-à-vis relations with Russia. It was only some years ago that we were talking about Russia being part of the wider European family and involved in closer co-operation with Europe, yet over the past few weeks and months—perhaps over the past two years, to be precise—we have heard less talk of that.

I think that, by Russia coming alongside Europe, we will be able to lock in trade, and if we lock in trade, hopefully we will be able to lock in democracy, and if we lock in democracy, hopefully it will follow that some of these important issues relating to freedom of speech, protection of religious minorities, equal rights and human rights are addressed. I therefore hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to say what the UK position is on Russia and future strategic partnerships.

To conclude, the murder of Alexander Litvinenko was completely unacceptable, and the way in which it was done was, as I said, sinister and tragic in equal measure, but I hope that, as a result of that murder, the Government will begin to have a policy on how political dissidents operate in this country. If anything positive could come out of Mr. Litvinenko's death, it would be new thinking on how political dissidents are allowed to operate in this country.

I should like to put it on the record, in case Mrs. Litvinenko reads the record of the debate, that our thoughts and prayers are with her and we are all very sorry about the death of her husband. We all hope that his killer will be brought to justice.

9.55 am

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on seeking the debate, which is important. Clearly, the bilateral relationship with Russia has moved on, in a very difficult way, over recent days. However, I must distance myself quite considerably from some of the tone of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, at least the first part of which seemed to be far more critical of the British position than the Russian position. That is not a reality that I recognise. We should say from the outset that the murder of a British national, Alexander Litvinenko, in the streets of Britain, even if he had left Russia and whatever his background was, is unacceptable in every way. That is unequivocal. There is no redeeming feature; no other side to it. We can only condemn the murder and the murderers.

I do not know what the trail of evidence is in respect of the person named—Mr. Lugovoi. That ought properly to be a matter for the courts, but it ought to be something on which the Russians want to co-operate, because unfortunately the Litvinenko case has crystallised many of the concerns that people who are well disposed towards Russia have about our bilateral relationship with Russia and more generally about the role that Russia wants to play in the wider Europe and on the wider world stage.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin is absolutely right: we have a long-term interest in a good relationship with a Russia that itself wants to be a good partner. The difficulty, frankly, and it has been an increasing difficulty

[Tony Lloyd]

over recent years, is to know what the motive is not of the Russian people—I emphasise that—but of the very specific narrow clique of people who run the Kremlin, round President Putin and round those who work within that ambit, because it is difficult to have a benign interpretation of developments in Russia in recent times.

The hon. Gentleman rightly talked about what I think he described as the failure to make progress on human rights. In fact, it can probably be more bluntly put—the erosion of standards in respect of human rights in recent years. The spate of murders of journalists may be fortuitous, but it has certainly served the purpose of limiting the political criticism that did exist in Russia from people such as Anna Politkovskaya, who was killed not so long ago. As with the case of Mr. Litvinenko, nobody has been brought before the courts in respect of the Politkovskaya case. Of course, that is a case in which the Russian authorities could have brought somebody before the Russian courts for a crime committed in Russia, but we still await developments in that respect. The rather sad interpretation of the situation is that it is not the ambition to bring those who murder journalists to court, because it is a very effective way of controlling criticism in the media. That has to be central to an understanding of Russia.

It also has to be central to an understanding of Russia that we have seen the Putinisation of the Russian economy, whereby the control of the economy is probably as tight now as it was in Soviet times. That is one of the paradoxes. Russia now has a quasi-market economy, but it is used for sectional and narrow ends and not in the interests, frankly, of the broad Russian population. That ought to concern us. The hon. Gentleman says that we ought to lock Russia in by way of a trade relationship. I would be delighted if I believed that that could be the case, but although many hon. Members have espoused in the House over a number of years the view that trade and economic freedom automatically implies political freedom, that no longer fits the reality of the modern world—not simply in Russia, by the way, but in other parts of the world. It is quite possible to run a successful trading economy—particularly if it is plumped up, as the Russian economy is, by the one factor of the massive increase in oil and gas prices—at the same time as deteriorating the objective circumstances of political democracy and human rights and basic freedoms.

Mr. John Horam (Orpington) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to refer to the Putinisation of the economy. Putin is doing a great disservice to ordinary Russian people, who get little benefit from high oil and gas prices. Nor are his actions in the medium and long-term interests of the Russian economy, whose failure to observe international norms is deterring badly needed investment in Russia's oil and gas industries.

Tony Lloyd: I totally agree. Any examination of Russia's economic future would show a number of things, one of which—this should be obvious—is that Russia is using the high value of gas and oil and will continue to do so for a long time. However, the benefits should be transferred not simply to narrow areas of exploitation and to industries downstream from oil and gas, but to the Russian economy more broadly. To do that, however, Russia's antiquated oil and gas production process will have to be modernised, which means that a deal must be struck, not necessarily with the west itself, but with western companies, which have the technology to transform that production process. The hon. Gentleman is right, however, that uncertainties in Russia mean that there will be increasing reluctance to reach such a deal.

That takes us back to a central issue that I have discussed on many occasions with Members of the Russian Duma and with other people in Russia. There is a real issue about the incompetence of the Russian courts and the lack of certainty about what they will do, because there is a perception that they can be pressurised by the political elite. As long as that continues, and the courts are not prepared to treat fairly all those who use the Russian legal system, investors from this country and elsewhere will remain uncertain about whether it is possible to get a proper economic return on their investment. There are therefore major issues about the weakness and, indeed, the deterioration of the Russian institutions that should provide the framework for the trading system that the hon. Member for The Wrekin recommends.

I do not want to take up too much time, because other colleagues want to speak in this important debate. However, we have a genuine problem around the Litvinenko case, and the Government must pursue the matter and take a high-minded and proper view of what happens, because the issue is not negotiable. A technical solution involving institutions such as those created for the Lockerbie trials—third-country trials—might be a possibility. The difficulty, however, is that an extradition process that prevents the extradition of any Russian citizen to Britain would also prevent extradition to a benign third country. Equally, although it is interesting to speculate about courts in Russia made up of British and Russian judges and all the rest, there would still be a lack of confidence about the capacity and ambition of the Russian legal process to guarantee a trial that is fair to the accused and, in this case, the Litvenenko family, and which allowed the pursuit of justice more generally, so that those who are properly accused and found guilty know that their sentence reflects the crimes that they have committed.

Mark Pritchard: I would like the main suspect, Mr. Lugovoi, to come before a court—wherever that might be—but does the hon. Gentleman agree that it might be difficult for Mr. Lugovoi to have a fair trial in a UK court, given the sum of the media coverage?

Tony Lloyd: Lawyers will always argue about the capacity to hold a fair trial, but we should never allow people to argue that media coverage prevents trials such as that of Lugovoi, although such claims are made in respect of celebrities appearing within our own judicial process. It is unacceptable that someone who is guilty can get off by so publicising their case that it is prevented from ever coming to trial, and most of us would not accept that as a principle of justice in this county or more generally. We want Mr. Lugovoi to make a voluntary decision to stand before a British court, although I have no great expectation that he will do so.

Where the hon. Member for The Wrekin is right is that our relations with Russia will proceed over a long period. That is an important point, and neither we nor the Russians should underestimate how important our relations are to Britain. However, we must work at that

relationship. This might not please every member of the Conservative party, but working through the European Union will be important in our long-term relationship with Russia. It is important that EU countries are not seduced by the flow of oil and gas and that we are absolutely adamant and clear that we have a collective interest in our relationship with Russia being one between equals, and that we cannot be bullied and bought with supplies of gas and oil.

It is important that Russia understands that message. Unfortunately, we have seen a growing self-confidence in Russia on the back of rising oil and gas prices. That is not a bad thing in a way, because Russian morale was unhealthily low after the cold war, which was dangerous for internal Russian politics. However, the emergence of a Russia that sees itself as a bully regionally or on a wider scale is equally dangerous. We want a Russia that we can deal with as a member of the Security Council and the United Nations—one that is a leading player in the world economy and a country of real influence.

We can treat Russia with respect, but if we are to have that respect, we must be able to depend on Russia to begin the process of reforming its political institutions. It must do that in line with the international commitments that it has made to uphold the proper standards of a law-based democratic society. In such a society, the basic human rights to which Russia has signed up under Council of Europe and United Nations conventions must be properly honoured. If we can get that message across to Russia, we will be able to have the relationship that we should have with a mature member of the world family.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Hugh Bayley (in the Chair): Order. Three hon. Members are trying to catch my eye, and I will try to start the winding-up speeches at half-past 10. I hope that hon. Members will co-operate so that everybody has an opportunity to speak.

10.7 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on securing this important debate, not least because he has had the courage to say something a little unorthodox. It would be all too easy simply to go along with the Government's line on Russia and although I agree partly with their line, my hon. Friend has made an important contribution. We also had important contributions from the hon. Members for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who know much about these matters.

One of the great concerns in our debates about Russia is that there is perhaps a lack of understanding about the importance of respect, face and a sense of courtesy and consideration, and many Russian politicians feel that they have not had those things from the west for quite some time. The Soviet Union was one of two global superpowers until 1991, and as the hon. Member for Manchester, Central rightly said, there was a real sense of damaged pride in the years following its collapse and the emergence of the Russian Federation, first under Boris Yeltsin and, more recently, under Vladimir Putin.

I do not suggest for one moment that there is a direct equivalence between our extradition demands on the one hand and the various demands from the Russian side on the other, but it is easy to see that Russia feels that there is a lack of respect for its system, when compared with ours. As I said, I do not suggest that there is a direct equivalence, but the issue goes to the heart of some of the concerns that now face the Foreign Office. It is eight years since Vladimir Putin became the Russian President, and there have been high hopes of a good, strong relationship between our two countries, and between Russia and the European Union, and it is a great shame that things have soured so quickly, to the extent that bilateral relations have deteriorated.

I want to talk about two main things in my brief contribution. First, there are the economic issues. Obviously, my constituency contains the Cities of London and Westminster, which are important economic areas, but the benefit that they receive from Russian money and bilateral trade has been upset, and could be further upset, by the difficulties between our two nations.

To go back to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin about the conduct of the Home Office and, indeed, the Foreign Office, in relation to individuals such as the late Mr. Litvinenko who come to this country, I several times expressed concern in the House to erstwhile Home and Foreign Secretaries about the procedure by which individuals have come into this country and put my constituents at risk—because it was in the west end of London that the appalling poisoning in question took place.

In many ways our trade and economic relations with the Russian Federation have been a great success story in recent years. British investment reached more than £2.5 billion in the first nine months of last year, which makes Britain the single largest investor among G7 countries. That figure is expected to be much higher this year, not least because of the thriving oil and gas sector alluded to by the hon. Member for Manchester, Central. I understand that that bilateral trade has trebled in the past five years, and Britain is the world's third largest destination for Russian investments. That is, I think, reflected in the great number of Russian companies coming into the stock exchange and the alternative investment market, and the large number of Russian nationals coming to live here, many of whom have not fallen out with the Russian regime at all. It must be stressed that such problems are very much the minority.

As has been pointed out, Russia is the world's largest gas producer and exporter, and is currently the second largest oil producer. There is little doubt that, given the difficulties that the Soviet Union and Russia faced in the past 20 years, that fact has been used to exert a certain amount of political muscle, which is a matter of concern to us all.

There are some very wealthy—and some less wealthy—Russian individuals working in London. We want to encourage that, and to encourage many of our nationals to have the experience of going to work in such an exciting country, on the trade side. I fear, however, that because of the current concern, and our problem over extradition arrangements, we will encounter difficulties in the years ahead. I have a fax that arrived this morning from Count Andrei Tolstoy-Miloslavsky, a constituent of mine. As a businessman he said:

"Please could you convey to the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister"—

[Mr. Mark Field]

we have not quite got the organ grinder here, although perhaps we have the monkey; but this is a serious point—

"that together they are in the process of ruining a very successful business relationship that we in business have built up with great difficulty and hard work over the years between the Russian Federation and Great Britain."

The decisions to be made are difficult and I do not suggest for a minute that economic or financial considerations should bypass all others; they certainly should not. However, I have several times expressed deep concern about extradition arrangements. There are, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin pointed out, 21 outstanding requests for extradition of people in the UK, many of whom are connected to the now bankrupt Yukos oil company.

I have a great concern in relation to the Litvinenko case; I asked the Home Office several times for full details—and it was appropriate, not least given the circumstances of his death, that we should have such full details—of the precise arrangements that were made for him to get a passport in double quick time. I worry that we are allowing individuals into this country, not just from the Russian Federation but from many other parts of the world—including, in particular, areas of the middle east, giving rise to long-term problems—who are effectively using Britain as a safe haven from which to agitate against other sovereign states. We rightly have a proud record in this country of giving asylum to political refugees. We are obliged to do so under various international conventions. However, we need to give serious consideration to what is going on.

I am not naïve about the possibility that in certain cases individuals who come to this country from the Russian Federation and elsewhere may assist our security services, and that that is a reason for fast-tracking their passport claims. However, ultimately, if individuals come to this country and agitate against another sovereign state—against President Putin, in the present case, but the point also applies to people from Pakistan or Saudi Arabia who create difficulties—it is likely to be my constituents, and those of other hon. Members, who will be put at risk if there are shootings in the street, or poisonings and the like. It is vital to ensure that people who come to this country to settle, or who seek political asylum or are given British passports, do so on the basis that they understand the importance of the rule of law in this country, and that they accept those standards. We should send the message loud and clear that those who do not want to abide by those rules, and want to use Britain as a safe haven for agitation, will not be accepted.

In my constituency it was often thought that somehow we were protecting ourselves against terrorist attack by allowing people who were effectively agitating against sovereign states to come from the Arab world to Londonistan, over in the Edgware road. That is a naïve thought, and that naiveté was shown up two years ago on 7 July 2005. I hope that the Minister will give the matter serious consideration. I should have liked to say more, but I appreciate that other hon. Members want to say something in the debate. It is an important one, and I look forward to the Minister's reply.

10.16 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I will be brief. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will no doubt have more to say than I will. I want to take up a point that arose earlier, but I shall be careful about how I phrase it, because it concerns a constituent who came to see me some months ago; I shall not name him or his company. He is part of the arrangement to do with the residue of Yukos in the west. He came to see me, as constituents do, to explain to me some of the repercussions of what has happened, and the Russian Government's pursuit of anyone and anything that has a relationship with the former Yukos company.

We all know that the Yukos affair has dragged on for a long time. Obviously, Khodorkovsky and Lebedev are currently in Russian prisons, and likely to be there a long time. However, it is probably less well known that other individuals—the majority of whom are not, I think, Russian—have been subject to a vigorous campaign from the Kremlin, which shows no sign of abating. That means that my constituent is no longer able to carry on his business to the extent that he used to. He has even to be wary about where he goes on holiday, because of the repercussions of action taken against him through the Russian Government in a third country or even this country. That is deeply worrying.

Mark Pritchard: I accept that there have no doubt been occasions, and perhaps will be in the future—let us hope not—on which the Russian state has been behind some targeting of individuals, but does the hon. Gentleman accept that some people have been killed, injured or kidnapped by people from criminal gangs and competitors in the black markets in which they deal?

Mr. Drew: I am sure that that may be the case, but it is not really the point that I am making. I want to keep my remarks brief, and to ask questions of the Minister, given that the Foreign Office has been helpful in the individual case I have described.

To conclude, there seems, from what I can see, to be a serious anomaly in current extradition provisions relating to Russia. Russian citizens who have been granted asylum in the UK cannot be extradited to stand trial in Russia; they are subject to our court process. As we know, Russian citizens cannot, according to the constitution, be extradited to this country. However, UK citizens in the UK, let alone those in a third country, have no such political protection. That is also the case with mutual legal assistance requests from Russia, which are subject to the court process, rather than any greater protection.

Through my hon. Friend the Minister, I ask the Government to call on the Russian Federation fully to respect the human rights of those who have been involved in the Yukos affair and to ensure that the rule of law and international treaty obligations apply. Until that happens, the Government should call on our European partners to deny extradition requests from the Russian Federation. They should also review its status as a category 2 territory under the Extradition Act 2003. These are important matters, and there is a matter of precedent here. Someone took on the business commitment of dealing with the residue of Yukos in the west and further afield, which someone had to do, and they are

now liable to the Russian Government's efforts to curtail their freedom. There is no more important issue for the British Foreign Office to deal with.

10.21 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) not only on securing today's debate, but on becoming the chair of the all-party group on Russia only yesterday. However, I must say that his speech is one of the most dangerous that I have heard since I became an MP, because, as I shall try to elucidate, he fails to understand or recognise fully the dangers of the human rights abuses in Russia. He makes a moral equivalence between extradition requests and proceedings in this country and those in Russia, which is a dangerous equivalence to make. He underestimates the direction in which Russia is going—a direction that will not only damage commercial interests in the medium and long term for the people of Russia and this country, but lead to a dwindling of democracy in that country with the steady advance of a totalitarian regime. He might think that I am exaggerating, but we will see, in future years, who proves to be right.

I agree completely with the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) that Russia faced a particular difficulty after experiencing an enormous political convulsion such as this country has not had to live with for many centuries. In a tiny space of time, it has had to address the sense of national and personal pride that attaches to being Russian. We have talked about Russia today when we mean the Russian Federation. The concept of Russia that many Russians, or people in the former Soviet Union, grew up with has been completely dismantled and changed. We, as a country, our European allies and anyone who wants to work closely with the Russian Federation needs to be conscious that it is a great nation with an extraordinary cultural history. Few countries can match the talent of that country in so many different areas, such as culturally, with Tchaikovsky, Pushkin and Rublyov. Few countries can match its enormous mineral and physical resources, its geographical dispersal or its historical complexity, which is woven into many different understandings of the relationships of religion to the state and of the individual to society.

Of course, we must walk with trepidation when we talk about our relationship with Russia, because, all too often, it is easy for us—the hon. Member for The Wrekin might accuse me of falling into my own trap—to face up to the Russian Federation in a way that makes it feel that we do not respect it. That would be dangerous. However, it is important to say that the level of human rights abuses in Russia today is so significant that no country that respects human rights and believes in the foundation of the principle of law can engage in an open relationship with the Russian Federation without being explicit about the problems there.

In our society, we believe in the fundamental right of non-governmental organisations to operate and to criticise the Government, the institutions of society and the state in whatever way they want. The situation for NGOs in the Russian Federation is getting worse year by year. Only recently, political parties have faced more difficult actions involving the courts that have made it much more difficult for people to enjoy their full political freedoms. Life was made more difficult for NGOs in Russia in April of last year, when President Putin signed into law a Bill demanding that they register their activities and funding sources with the federal registration service or risk facing closure. Immediately afterwards, there was a series of attacks on a large number of NGOs in Russia, which made many organisations close down.

There is also a problem with media oppression, which has been adverted to by a few Members. It is not only the death of Anna Politkovskaya that has worried many people in the west. According to the International Federation of Journalists, more than 80 journalists have been murdered because of their work in Russia since 1993, and there has not been a single prosecution in any of those cases. The organisation says that of 289 journalists killed in Russia in the past 14 years,

"more than 80 of the deaths resulted from the work the journalists were doing directly".

The Russian state now has a virtual—indeed, actual—monopoly over the entire national television network, which means that there is no opportunity for political opponents of the regime to have a fair opportunity when it comes to election time. Several television channels have been deprived of their licences by the Government, and several have been taken off air, so it is, perhaps, not surprising that President Putin has said:

"We have never had freedom of speech in Russia, so I do not understand what can be violated".

Malcolm Bruce: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that that kind of repression of the media by Russian agencies is not confined to Russia? They are attacking the media in neighbouring countries, particularly Estonia and, I was told yesterday, Azerbaijan. Websites operated by opposition groups have been targeted and taken out by sources inside Russia.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but I shall not talk about those issues because I want to discuss extradition and I have only a few minutes left.

Only last week, the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation upheld a law requiring that political parties must have a minimum of 50,000 members to be allowed by the federal registration service to take part in elections. That will close down several political parties in Russia—yet again we see human rights being eroded. In its report of last year, Amnesty International referred to systematic torture across every part of the Russian Federation. The use of torture in prisons, police cells and the criminal justice system is one reason why many people there have less confidence than the hon. Member for The Wrekin seems to have in the criminal justice system.

British organisations have also suffered. The British Council has been systematically targeted since 2004 for its activities in Russia. The Russian authorities have refused to clarify the council's legal status, and recently ordered it to close its offices in Yekaterinburg. On top of that, the British ambassador and several other members of the British Embassy staff in Moscow have been systematically harassed by a distressingly named organisation, the pro-Putin youth organisation, Nashi. I am afraid that the Russian authorities have been very reluctant to intervene. We should be standing by our ambassador.

[Chris Bryant]

I come to my main point. The hon. Member for The Wrekin makes a moral equivalence—I have heard him do this twice—between the 21 extradition requests that Russia has made to the UK and the one that we have outstanding regarding Mr. Lugovoi. That is entirely inappropriate. If he were to read any of the proceedings, as I have—they were all considered in this country on an entirely independent basis by the same judge, Judge Timothy Workman—he would realise that the basis of the Russians' extradition cases are extremely weak. The hon. Gentleman cited 21 cases, which must include that of Akhmed Zakayev. Judge Workman said of that case:

"I...find as a fact that the Russian Government are seeking extradition for purposes of prosecuting Mr Zakayev on account of his nationality and his political opinions."

That is something that we would never countenance.

In 2005, in the case of two former Yukos executives, Dmitry Maruev and Natalia Chernysheva, Judge Workman said that it would be unsafe to extradite the pair because in their dealing with the case

"there is a substantial risk that the judges of the Moscow City Court would succumb to political interference".

That is another fundamental reason why it would be impossible for us to extradite.

In the case of Mr. Alexander Temerko, Judge Workman said:

"I am satisfied that the request for Mr Temerko's extradition is in fact made for the purpose of prosecuting or punishing him for his political opinions. I am satisfied that, if he were extradited, he would be prejudiced at his trial and punished or detained by reasons of his political opinions."

That is another reason why there is no moral equivalence between the extradition requests from Russia and the one that we have made.

Hugh Bayley (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that we must move to the wind-ups.

10.31 am

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr. Bayley. I congratulate the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on securing the debate, in which several interesting contributions have been by hon. Members from both sides.

The debate is particularly timely, given the events of the past few weeks, which have brought UK relations with Russia back into the news regularly. It is important to recognise that those events came at the end of a period in which the bilateral relations between the countries deteriorated. We would all agree that, after an interlude of relative co-operation between Russia and the UK in the 1990s, it is sad and distressing that there has been renewed tension.

The UK's relationship with Russia is, without doubt, hugely important in the wider context of ongoing east-west dialogue. Russia's co-operation on security is extremely valuable, as is its collaboration on many other international issues, such as climate change and, of course, terrorism. It would be a great loss to both parties if the relationship were not to regain its stability.

I reiterate that Liberal Democrats fully support the measures taken by the UK Government to convince the Russian Government to extradite Mr. Lugovoy to the UK. The crime of which he is accused is a terrible one and the charges that he faces are most serious. The deliberate poisoning of Mr. Litvinenko by the administration of a lethal dose of polonium-210, a highly radioactive substance, in London in November 2006 was premeditated, cold-blooded and appalling. Not only was the death of Mr. Litvinenko slow and painful, but it put at risk the lives of hundreds of others with whom the perpetrator came into contact, both in London and abroad. The crime demands to be pursued to an appropriate conclusion—justice needs to be done and to be seen to be done. All hon. Members would agree that the rule of law needs to be upheld in this case, as in any other, and that Russia's refusal to extradite Mr. Lugovoy is both disappointing and worrying in the context of future UK-Russian relations.

If Russia seeks a profitable and positive relationship with the UK, it needs to commit to co-operation on matters of justice. In the light of these events, is the Department planning to press for criminal justice to be included in the next EU-Russia partnership and co-operation agreement? Is the Department considering revisiting the UK-Russian extradition arrangements to ensure that the relationship is fairer and more equitable than it appears to be at present?

The UK Government's moves in the past month to put pressure on the Russians have our full support. The expulsion of four Russian embassy staff was proportionate, as was the suspension of visa negotiations with the Russian authorities. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Russians' reaction in turn could have been much worse than it was. Although we deprecate their unjustified expulsion of our four UK embassy staff, there might be room for optimism: the Russians might not want to prolong this dispute and there might be a willingness to avoid any further dramatic escalation in this crisis. We must hope so, and we must hope that Russia appreciates that it, too, has a lot to lose if this relationship falters.

Other concerns about Russia should be aired in this debate. One of those relates to Kosovo. The delay in resolving that matter is of great concern, and the arrangements established when NATO intervened to stop the bloodshed and violence engineered by Milosevic are by no means stable. The conflict is likely to escalate unless it is resolved soon. The recent actions of Agim Ceku, the Prime Minister of the province, confirm that. He announced earlier this month that, unless the international community could overcome Russian opposition, Kosovo would declare its independence in November. I put it on the record that, although we strongly support Kosovo's independence, it would be inadvisable to go through with the announcement, because it would undoubtedly increase friction in the area and could result in a renewed outbreak of hostility from Serbia.

It is clear that, despite the Russian objections, the matter must be resolved through an international process, ideally via the United Nations. The fact that Russia has promised to veto any UN Security Council draft resolution that would give Kosovo "supervised independence" is, therefore, disappointing. It has caused the Security Council to delay a vote on the draft resolution and may

mean that any decision on the future of Kosovo will take place instead through the contact group. What is the UK Government's view on the progress towards a resolution of this dispute?

Another matter that deserves mention in any debate about Russia is human rights. International concern about human rights in Chechnya remains a particular concern. In March, the Council of Europe's human rights chief, Thomas Hammarberg, visited Chechnya where he said he found evidence of a

"real widespread pattern of serious ill-treatment and many cases of torture against those who have been arrested."

Such cases included beatings and the use of electric shock.

The concerns continue within Russia itself. There have been reports from non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch of torture, racially motivated attacks and the victimisation of opponents of Vladimir Putin. Perhaps the Minister could update us on human rights violations in Russia. What, if any, recent discussions have taken place between the two Governments on this important matter?

A climate of fear and intimidation, cultivated by the Russian Government, impedes and restricts the actions of NGOs in Russia, apparently because of a belief that they are connected to western espionage. Will the Minster tell us what the Government are doing to support the valuable humanitarian work of NGOs in Russia, and whether any negotiations with Russia on this issue have taken place?

Russia's energy policy has also caused considerable concern in recent years. There is much debate in international circles about whether Russia's near monopoly on oil and gas is being used as an instrument for its internal and external policy ambitions. The expropriation of Shell and BP interests in Russia has been seen by many analysts as facilitating the Russian state's reassertion of control over the energy sector. Does the Minister agree that Russia is using its control over energy in eastern Europe—and now much of western Europe—as a lever with which to influence or perhaps manipulate foreign policy? If so, does he share my concern about that development?

Our relationship with the Russians is vital for all those reasons and for those mentioned at the beginning of my contribution. The Government need to continue to work to maintain a constructive relationship with Russia, but they must also ensure that areas of real concern are dealt with appropriately and effectively. I hope that the Minister agrees that, to achieve that, the UK needs to work closely with the rest of the European Union to create a coherent and co-ordinated foreign policy towards Russia.

10.40 am

Mr. Mark Francois (Rayleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bayley.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on his recent achievement of becoming chairman of the all-party group on Russia, and on securing this debate on an important topic. He introduced the debate in typically robust style.

I noted the speech of the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd) who brought his considerable experience as an ex-Foreign Office Minister to our deliberations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) not only tweaked the Minister's nose, but rightly reminded the House that the tragic murder that I am about to touch on took place in his constituency. He also raised the implications of those events for other constituents whom he represents.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) raised a constituency point in the context of the debate and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) raised Russia's human rights record, particularly the treatment of journalists, which concerns us all. That was also touched on by the Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mark Hunter).

It is a pleasure to see the Minister, my opposite number, in his place. For some curious reason, we seem to be seeing rather a lot of each other, and I believe that we are meeting later this afternoon on an entirely different matter.

The debate is on the relatively broad topic of UK-Russia relations, and I do not want to use the limited time available to speak only about the Litvinenko case. Nevertheless, this issue clearly affects the relationship between our two countries, so I want to make a few comments on where matters now sit. Let me say at the outset that Her Majesty's Opposition have supported and continue to support both the tone and substance of the Government's response to Russia's refusal to extradite Andrey Lugovoy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said in his response to the Foreign Secretary's statement on 16 July,

"Across British politics, we are united in regarding this matter with the utmost seriousness."—[*Official Report*, 16 July 2007; Vol. 463, c. 23.]

That remains the case. Britain has the right to expect co-operation from Russia in the extradition of Mr. Lugovoy but, unfortunately, that has not been forthcoming.

Given that failure, it was right and proportionate for the British Government to take action to expel four Russian diplomats. The Russian reaction to the expulsion of the four diplomats came on 19 July with the expulsion of four British diplomats from our Embassy in Moscow and a statement that it might end co-operation in the fight against terrorism, which we would obviously regret. That is an entirely unjustified act, and the only correct response, as the Foreign Secretary made clear, remains the extradition of Mr. Lugovoy.

The Russians have stated that one reason for their failure to extradite Mr. Lugovoy is that its constitution disallows it. However, on Monday, Britain's Ambassador to Russia, Sir Anthony Brenton, said:

"Russia's constitution, like those of other states, is clearly capable of interpretation in the light of circumstances".

I am sure that the Minister heard that.

As the Minister knows, I have a great interest in the interpretation of constitutions, particularly at the moment, so I would be interested to know what advice he has received on Russia's constitution in the light of its responsibilities under the 1957 European convention on extradition. I would be interested to have some insight into the Foreign Office's legal advice on that.

On 20 July, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, apparently began to lower the temperature by suggesting that the

"Kremlin is interested in having relations with Britain brought back to normal."

[Mr. Mark Francois]

The following day, President Putin suggested to the *Moscow Times* that what he described as a "mini-crisis" would be resolved. Unfortunately, accordingly to reports of a television interview, President Putin yesterday apparently accused Britain of colonial thinking in pursuing the matter. It is to be hoped that relations will eventually normalise, provided that the Russian Government accept that the Litvinenko issue will not simply go away and that it will eventually have to be resolved one way or another.

Another reason for concern in Anglo-Russian relations is the recent announcement by President Putin in mid-July that he would no longer be bound by the conventional armed forces in Europe treaty, which was signed in 1990. The hon. Member for Rhondda raised the matter last week during the Government's statement. As an ex-Territorial Army infantry officer during the cold war, I once had a very close interest in Russian tanks, and in my present position I still do, albeit for slightly different reasons. The CFE treaty limits the number of heavy conventional weapons between the Atlantic ocean and the Ural mountains, and when it was signed it was generally regarded as a key development in ending the cold war and in Russia's re-engagement with the west.

As I understand it, Russia has technically suspended the treaty rather than withdrawn from it wholesale, and a practical effect is that it will no longer permit inspections or exchange data on its troop deployments in line with the treaty's provisions. That is a worrisome development, so will the Minister say what recent representations, if any, Her Majesty's Government have made to the Russian Government on this issue and what response, if any, they have received? Similarly, will he give us at least a feel of what discussions he has had with our NATO partners and what their response has been?

Despite those differences, it is worth restating that there are many areas where co-operation between Britain and Russia is desirable: trade, the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, drugs, crime, and the Middle East peace process. In addition to areas of mutual co-operation, there are areas where Russia could specifically benefit from British help. Russia needs British investment in its industries and for Britain to buy its energy—something that we are willing to do in principle, but without becoming over-reliant on Russian supplies. Several hon. Members touched on that briefly this morning.

In return, Russia could usefully benefit from British investment and technical expertise to exploit increasingly hard-to-reach reserves of energy in hostile environments. It is in the nature of business that British companies thinking of investing in Russia will look for political stability and positive relations between our countries when making investment decisions and those points should not be lost on Russia, not least as it faces its own energy challenges, particularly in the decade ahead.

Russia and the UK would both gain from normalisation of relations and mutual co-operation on the issues of the day. However Russia should be under no illusion that there is anything but a united political front in Britain that deplores the murder of one of its subjects, and that is determined to seek the extradition of the main suspect to stand trial on British soil. Russia should not expect a full normalisation of relations until it plays by normal internationally accepted standards of behaviour.

Similarly, Conservative Members are concerned about the recent Russian decision to suspend the CFE treaty, which we view as something of a retrograde step. The treaty has been an important part in normalising military relations since the end of the cold war, and we would like the Russian Government fully to rejoin that agreement as soon as possible.

We hope that Russia will look for opportunities to work positively with the UK in a range of areas including trade, the fight against drugs and terrorism, and the development of new energy supplies, which could potentially benefit us all. We hope that the Russian Government will bear all those points in mind, but before we hear what they think about it, we are interested more immediately in what Her Majesty's Government think about it.

10.48 am

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Jim Murphy): Thank you, Mr. Bayley, for overseeing our proceedings this morning. Not only because it is customary, but because of his deep knowledge and interest in Russia, I congratulate the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on securing the debate, and on the knowledge and perspective that he brings to it.

It may predate our time in the House, but in previous years there was always a conversation about Russia with some analysis of Marx and other issues associated with that, but today we have heard from four different Marks. The hon. Members for The Wrekin, for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field), for Rayleigh (Mr. Francois) and for Cheadle (Mark Hunter), all brought their own perspective as Marks and their own kind of Marksist analysis to the conversation.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who raised an important point. He rightly did not want to provide additional details, but I am happy to discuss it with him formally and in more detail if he wishes. I thank him for his kind words about the support of Foreign Office staff, which will be heard with great gratitude by those who have been working on the important issue that he raised. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and others for their points about the work that our ambassador, Tony Brenton and his fantastic team do to look after UK interests in Russia. As my hon. Friend alluded to, they sometimes work in unjustifiably difficult circumstances. I wish only that we had had the opportunity to listen to the end of his excellent speech. I hope that, at some point, we will have the opportunity to hear the rest of his analysis.

I shall now deal with the substance of the points made by hon. Members. I shall come to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd) later in my short comments. I will not have time to respond to the dozens of questions that have been asked.

I thank the Opposition Front-Bench teams for not only the content but the tone of their remarks. It is important that we have unity on this important matter across the European Union, although I do not want to

make a wider point about that, because it is for another day. That we have had two strong, unanimously agreed EU presidency statements is of real significance and heightens the importance of our co-operative role in the European Union. It is also important that the House of Commons and the House of Lords speak with one voice on the matter, both in their content and tone. Opposition Front Benchers have done that today and it is important that, where possible, we retain that consensus in content and tone. As we now know, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central is well aware, tone is often as important as content in some aspects of our conversations with our friends in Russia.

I shall make some general points and then come on to specifics. It is important to say clearly that the UK is a partner with Russia in more international organisations than almost any other country. Those organisations include the UN Security Council, the G8, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe. The UK's relationship with Russia is crucial and we must not lose sight of the fact that Russia is a key player in enabling us to deliver on our international priorities, including Afghanistan, climate change, chemical, nuclear and biological weapons, energy and, of course, trade and investment.

Hon. Members have already reflected on the fact that in 2006, the UK was the largest foreign investor in Russia. In the same year, our trading relationship with Russia reached an all-time high, with annual exports of more than £3 billion, which my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary noted in his statement to the House on 16 July. Russia is, and will remain, a key international partner of the United Kingdom. It is for precisely that reason that we need a relationship based on trust and mutual respect.

All hon. Members recall the detail of the horrific circumstances in which Mr. Litvinenko, a British citizen, was murdered in the heart of London, and in which hundreds of residents and visitors were put at risk. I emphasise that it is precisely because we have ambitions for the UK-Russia relationship that we needed to take the measures that my right hon. Friend announced in his statement on 16 July. The Government neither sought nor welcomed the situation, but it was vital that we addressed it. A set of shared values is the foundation of an effective international partnership. Russian failure to co-operate made inevitable the necessary specific, targeted action that we took. Our action was intended to uphold the key individual rights and vital principles of independent judicial process in the United Kingdom.

In that context, we must ensure that such acts do not happen again. Ensuring the safety of British citizens and our visitors, as well as the 40,000-strong Russian community in the United Kingdom, is of paramount importance. We have been especially heartened by the statements of support from not only the European Union, but the United States.

My hon. Friends the Member for Rhondda and for Manchester, Central asked about a number of specific points and made some telling observations about human rights in Russia. In response to that, I repeat comments that I made to last week's meeting of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, on our relationship with Russia and our attitude to human rights there. Russia has not made the progress on human rights that many of us expected and hoped that it would in the early to mid-1990s. Hon. Members have reflected on the limits to media freedom, the murders and intimidation of a number of journalists, the heavy-handed policing of political demonstrations, and restrictions on political parties. At each opportunity, the United Kingdom Government have sought to raise our concerns with the Russian authorities. This is not about seeking to export UK values, as some have said, but about our determination to ensure that Russia upholds international standards of human rights and freedom. That is what is at stake in this matter.

Mark Pritchard: I know that the Minister will regret leaving the room without having answered at least one or two of the questions that I raised. On the subject of export, will he confirm that the Brazilian Government have asked for the extradition, or export, of Mr. Berezovsky?

Mr. Murphy: I do not wish to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, particularly given his newly elevated post as chair of the all-party group, but I will have to do so on this matter, because we do not comment publicly on whether we have received requests for extraditions from another party. He will understand that, although he might be disappointed.

On support for non-governmental organisations, we have raised those issues with the Russian authorities. The UK Government fund Russian NGOs and Government agencies. We are funding a system of public prison inspectors, for example, and we have helped the Russian Union of Journalists defend journalists' rights in Russia, which we will continue to do where we can. We also worked with the EU on human rights in Russia.

The suspension of the conventional armed forces in Europe treaty is regrettable. Within the dynamic of the CFE process, there is no reason why the Russians should be driven to take such action on that issue. It is suspension rather than something else, of course. There have been some outstanding issues in the conversation on the matter between NATO and Russia, not least about Georgia and Abhkazia and Transnistria and Moldova. We are working through those issues and we continue to find ways, through the NATO-Russian Permanent Joint Council, to discuss those issues with Russia.

Time has beaten me, and it has not allowed me to respond to all the points that hon. Members raised I conclude by saying that we continue to work with Russia in an important way in the UN, the G8, the NATO-Russian Permanent Joint Council and the European Union. Despite the events of the past week or two, Russia remains an important international partner of the United Kingdom. We are determined to ensure close engagement with Russia, which is vital on so many bilateral and multilateral issues. This morning, I hope that I have made it clear that we seek an active, open engagement with the Russian Government and the Russian people. When we disagree with Russia, we say so, and where obstacles exist, we will seek to resolve them through transparent, open, honest dialogue.

Motorcycle Test Facilities

11 am

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I thank you, Mr. Bayley, and I thank my colleagues for their warm welcome while leaving a debate on a subject important not only in my constituency but in many parts of the UK, and not just to motorcyclists but to many in the wider industry. I should declare an interest. I have never ridden a motorcycle, although my wife would encourage it. Nevertheless, it is a serious subject to many people. I am grateful for the interest that the Minister and his office showed before this debate, and hope that it will help us make some progress.

I shall provide a bit of history before detailing some general and specific concerns about the Driving Standards Agency's processes for centralising motorbike testing facilities. To put the introduction of new multi-purpose motorcycle test facilities into context, we need to go back to 2000, when the second EU directive on driving licences was agreed. A set of EU standards was produced requiring motorcycle tests to include a variety of new low-speed and higher-speed manoeuvres.

Under the new standards, extra and more demanding special manoeuvres must be included in every practical motorcycling test: at least two manoeuvres executed at low speed, including a slalom; at least two manoeuvres executed at higher speed, of which one should be in second or third gear at a speed of at least 30 kph; one manoeuvre to avoid an obstacle at a minimum speed of 50 kph; and at least two braking exercises, including an emergency brake at a minimum speed of 50 kph. The new EU standards imply significant changes to the UK's practical test for motorcyclists. The only special manoeuvre in the current UK motorcycling test is an emergency braking exercise undertaken on the road at about 20 kph. Although the new standards specify what a test must contain, member states have flexibility to organise the details.

In January 2001, the DSA issued a consultation paper describing the new requirements and seeking views on the matters in which the directive allows member states flexibility to determine locally. In particular, it asked whether the higher-speed manoeuvres should be conducted on the road or off the road, and whether they should be part of the practical motorcycling test or a separate manoeuvres test.

In August 2002, the DSA published the responses and explained Ministers' decisions as follows. The new standards require low and higher-speed special manoeuvres to be added to the motorcycling test. A fair and consistent assessment is best achieved by using a pre-determined layout—that is, ground markings and cones—and it would be impractical to use one on a public road with other traffic. That implies a need for secure testing areas even if one discounts the risks to the candidate and other road users of testing the manoeuvres on the roads.

The DSA's second point is that the new standards also require the test to include a higher-speed emergency braking manoeuvre at 50 kph. At that speed and in good road and weather conditions, a motorcycle needs a minimum of 23 m to stop, compared with about 12 m in the current braking exercise. The DSA reported that there are overwhelming road safety objections to conducting higher-speed emergency braking exercises where there might be pedestrians or other traffic. A requirement for secured testing areas appears conclusive, regardless of how the higher-speed obstacle-avoidance manoeuvre is assessed.

In consequence, the DSA has extensive plans to roll out a network of multi-purpose test centres by October 2008. The plans include using the test centres not just for motorcycle activities but for car tests. That brings me to the reason for this debate. Where will the new test centres be located, and what practical and economic impact will the changes have?

Until recently, we in Moray have benefited from car and motorcycle driving test facilities, an LGV test centre and a theory test centre. Unfortunately, the theory test centre has been withdrawn and replaced by a visiting bus. The motorcycle test facilities are under threat, and motorcycle instructors, learner riders, local driving instructors and business owners are concerned that plans to move test facilities to Inverness will be detrimental to learners, businesses, bike and bike equipment retailers and the overall economy of Moray.

That seems somewhat divergent from the DSA's stated priorities. I draw the Minister's attention to a quote on the DSA website from its chief executive, Rosemary Thew:

> "The driver training industry bodies consider the presence and accessibility of test centres as being crucial to their business. The location of test centres therefore provides direct employment and encourages associated employment at local rider training and driving instructing schools."

The key phrase is "the location of test centres". For instructors in Moray, the removal of test facilities in the region—it is an entire local authority region—will be crucial to their businesses, but clearly not in a good way.

Moray's various bike instructors are well thought of, and their excellent teaching speaks for itself. Moray has one of the highest pass rates of any test centre—83 per cent., compared with pass rates in Aberdeen and Inverness in the mid-60 per cent range. Testing facilities might be moved more than an hour's ride away on a busy trunk road. I am certain that the Minister has travelled the A96; it can be a daunting road. I shall lobby my colleagues in the Scottish National party Government to upgrade it as soon as possible, but it remains a busy and at times tragically dangerous road. Having to travel to Inverness or Aberdeen on the A96 will discourage potential clients from taking advantage of the excellent teaching in Moray, as students are likely to want to learn on the roads where their test will take place. Rather than learning in Moray and then taking their test in Inverness or Aberdeen, people in those cities are likely to seek to learn in areas with which they are familiar.

I have written to the DSA about the issue, and the response has been somewhat revealing, albeit because of what the agency does not say rather than what it does. For example, the agency says that an average of only 20 tests a month are taken in Elgin, making it an economically unviable site for a multi-purpose test centre. However, the agency fails to say that Elgin has only a small capacity for tests. When I checked yesterday, Elgin's earliest available appointment was nearly three months away, compared with half that time in Inverness. It does not take a genius to work out that the DSA is using statistics to justify its position rather than giving

unbiased information. By failing to mention the Elgin test centre's capacity, it suggests that only 20 tests are being requested each month. I am assured by local trainers that that is not the case. In effect, the figures are being artificially suppressed to make the case for concentrating testing in Inverness and Aberdeen.

If I had to wait 11 weeks for a test in Elgin but could take one in five weeks in Inverness, there is a fair possibility that I, like other people, would choose to go to Inverness. It gives rise to a concerning possibility that figures for Elgin are artificially low, while test figures for Inverness are artificially inflated. As those figures form part of the basis of the assessment for potential new test centre locations, serious questions arise about the processes and procedures used in that test centre investment programme.

I take the view that using bike test figures to assess the need for a multi-purpose test centre in more rural areas such as Moray is too narrow an approach. It would be more appropriate to consider the combined total of tests for cars, bikes and LGVs and incorporate theory tests and other DSA activities at the same location. Other possibilities could involve the local police, who operate the successful pass plus scheme. Furthermore, other emergency services could use the location for accident demonstration projects, targeting young drivers and prospective learners. Combining those activities in a single location would make a far more viable option—and support the local economy, rather than shift important resources elsewhere.

Moray's test centre supports two full-time and two part-time instructors, and the wider bike-related business in Moray includes five shops that supply bikes and accessories; in turn, they support additional employment, including that of mechanics and sales staff. For some people, the numbers might seem relatively small and insignificant. However, the Minister will be aware that my constituency rates among the lowest wage economies in Scotland; on some criteria, it is sometimes the lowest—not something to have great pride in. The effect of the loss of any job or business on any knock-on trade is very significant. The Minister will remember the campaigns to retain RAF bases and the campaigns that needed to be fought to maintain maternity services in Elgin. He will also be aware that at a time when moves are afoot to try to bring together local government services from different local areas, there are concerns, which I share, that Moray—being part neither of the highlands, nor, in essence, of Grampian—may see many services drawn towards Inverness and Aberdeen. I wish both those places all the best, but, please, that should not come at Morayshire's cost.

Arguably, if bikers travel elsewhere for a test, they are likely to spend money elsewhere as well. There is also the all-important safety issue, to which I alluded earlier. Holding tests in Inverness will mean that learner bikers in Moray will have to travel for more than an hour on the A96, which, as I mentioned, has a reputation for bad accidents. At a recent surgery of mine, a learner rider from Lossiemouth in my constituency said that the move would

"force young drivers on to killer roads".

That stands in contrast with what the agency says on its website:

"We hope that communities, local authorities and driving instructors will recognise the important role of these new centres in supporting road safety."

If the centres are sited in Inverness and Aberdeen, there could be an odd by-product: we may increase risks to the safety of riders from Morayshire. Although bikers going for their tests should generally have a good number of lessons under their belts and have had appropriate instruction, it would not necessarily be their wish to spend well over an hour on a low-powered bike on a busy road just prior to the stressful experience of a driving test—and then have to make the same journey home.

This would not be condoned, but sotto voce it was suggested to me that some bike riders who had not passed their tests might see the changes as a disincentive to doing one, at a time when we are trying to raise standards across the board. I am concerned that, far from improving road safety, the changes could put inexperienced riders at unnecessary risk.

I go back to the viability of siting a new test centre in Moray. Elgin is a market town that draws people in from many miles around. There are a variety of potential locations for such a centre—perhaps the most notable is the current LGV test centre, sited just outside Elgin at a disused Ministry of Defence airfield. There is a strong argument for trying to obtain a long-term lease or to purchase land from another Government Department. That would ensure that the money spent remained in the public sector in the locality. I am sure that the Minister would be able to facilitate such a negotiation through his colleagues at the Ministry of Defence. Other options could and should be considered, such as sharing offices in the Moray area with the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency or adding a local face-to-face contact point for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency.

There is significant scope for combining the variety of services that the Department provides in one location in Moray. A bit of creative thinking could bring improved access to services—indeed, it could provide cross-agency working and efficiencies, rather than centralising one aspect of the DSA's activity, to the significant detriment of Moray. Bikers are set to join a demonstration in Moray next month, and I understand that hundreds plan to attend to express their frustration at the plans.

Will the Minister take action to ensure that bikers in more rural areas are not unduly discriminated against, and that excessive Government centralisation, which already causes substantial problems in respect of other Departments' delivery of services, will cease? Will he also give an assurance that he will seek answers on whether the way in which test centre figures are being used is appropriate and meaningful, and, if necessary, order a review of the roll-out of multi-purpose test centres?

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Tom Harris): I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) on securing a debate on this important issue. He has presented an eloquent argument on behalf of his constituents. His concerns are understandable, and I hope that I can address them during my remarks. I hope that he will forgive me if in doing so I repeat some of the background information that he has already mentioned.

[Mr. Tom Harris]

In their road safety strategy, "Tomorrow's roads: safer for everyone", published in 2000, the Government set challenging targets for reducing the number of road casualties. By 2010, we want to reduce by 40 per cent. the number of people killed or seriously injured on the roads and to reduce by 10 per cent. the number of slight casualties.

Motorcycling is becoming increasingly popular. More people are using motorcycles and mopeds to beat congestion and for leisure. We recognise that motorcycling has a role to play within transport as a whole. Our aim is to facilitate motorcycling as a travel choice within a safe and sustainable transport framework. To that end, in 2005 we published our motorcycling strategy in partnership with motorcycling and other interests.

Regrettably, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, motorcyclists represent a large proportion of road casualties. They make up about 1 per cent. of road traffic, but suffer about 20 per cent. of deaths and serious injuries. Although the overall number of road casualties is falling, the number of deaths among motorcyclists is increasing.

The road safety strategy gave improvements to driver training and testing, which play an important role in producing safer drivers and riders. It also identified European developments as a factor in future changes to the driving test. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, when member states translate European directives into domestic legislation, there is scope for them to take account of local conditions and to ensure a good fit with their prevailing laws.

In Great Britain, all motorcyclists and moped riders are required to complete compulsory basic training, or CBT, before riding on the road as learners. The CBT certificate is valid for two years. Applicants have to pass a theory test, including a test of hazard perception, and a practical riding test before being granted a full motorcycling licence.

European Union legislation on driving licences, agreed in 2000, set higher minimum requirements for driving tests conducted by member states. The higher standards are intended to ensure that the matters assessed in the theory and practical test are relevant to modern driving conditions. Those new EU standards have introduced extra and more demanding special manoeuvres that must be included in every practical motorcycling test undertaken in Great Britain from September 2008.

One of the new requirements, which the hon. Gentleman also mentioned, is that a higher-speed emergency braking manoeuvre should be added to the motorcycling test. It must be conducted at no less than 50 kph, equivalent to 31 mph. There are overwhelming road safety objections to conducting a higher-speed emergency braking exercise where there might be pedestrians or other traffic. Ministers therefore asked the Driving Standards Agency, which is responsible for delivering the driving and riding test in Great Britain, to explore whether such manoeuvres could be carried out in off-road testing areas free of other traffic. At the same time, the DSA designed an exercise that includes all of the various special manoeuvres requirements and that can be delivered in an effective and efficient manner from the off-road testing areas.

Those proposals, and others for the implementation of the new requirements, were the subject of full public consultation in December 2002. Consultees were offered the opportunity to comment on a number of service delivery options. They showed a preference for a package of off-road testing of the new higher-speed manoeuvres with all other special manoeuvres being tested on the same occasion immediately before the general on-road riding assessment. That avoids the safety risks of on-road testing while addressing the cost and access concerns raised by some consultees.

The Government decided to implement the new requirements in the way that most consultees preferred. To facilitate the delivery of the new manoeuvres exercise we identified a need to develop a national network of driving test centres based on an updated design. In order to exploit the value of the investment in the new centres we have decided that, wherever possible, they will be multipurpose. In addition to the motorcycling manoeuvres exercise and practical motorcycle test they will be used to deliver other types of practical test for learner car, lorry and bus drivers.

The intention is that most driving test candidates should be able to reach a test centre within 45 minutes, travelling no more than 20 miles.

Angus Robertson: Will the Minister clarify, from his personal experience, that to travel from Elgin to Inverness takes more than 45 minutes?

Mr. Harris: I have not had the privilege of travelling from or to the hon. Gentleman's constituency direct. I understand that it would take more than 20 minutes.

Where practical, we hope to make the off-road test sites available for training purposes when they are not being used for motorcycling tests. Since the proposals were first drawn up, the project has evolved. We have reviewed the service delivery need and conclude that between 40 and 50 multipurpose driving test centres will be required to meet the service standard criteria. However, to maximise population coverage and minimise the number of candidates who have to travel for longer than 45 minutes or further than 20 miles' we are seeking to develop up to 67 new centres. That gets to the heart of the hon. Gentleman's argument. I am delighted that he has not suggested that Scotland might be underserved in that respect, as 12 of the new centres will be in Scotland and 55 in England. Scotland will have 18 per cent. of the total number of centres, which is considerably higher than population might demand.

At the commencement of the project, we did not own or lease any sites that could provide a sufficient area of hard standing upon which to undertake the new manoeuvres. A programme of land acquisition and construction was initiated in 2005. Since December 2005, we have acquired 23 sites nationally. In Scotland, as I have said, we propose to build 12 new centres with off-road testing facilities. To date, we have acquired two suitable locations that will provide coverage to Scotland's two largest urban centres. One, at East Lothian, is nearing completion and one, in Scotland's first city, Glasgow, is already open and is being used to deliver driving tests. Once both centres are fully operational, 40 per cent. of the population of Scotland will be within a 45-minute journey from a new centre, while 45 per cent. will be within 20 miles of a new centre.

Further sites have been identified and we are proceeding with the acquisition and development programme. In addition to allowing us to maximise the use of the new centres by conducting car, lorry and bus tests from them, the multipurpose centres will offer improved accommodation and facilities for our customers and staff. As well as being fully compliant with the disability discrimination legislation, the new centres will support the Government's wider sustainability agenda.

We anticipate that for each new multipurpose driving test centre in Scotland, one driving test centre will relocate to the new facilities. Motorcycle testing is delivered from 35 driving test centres and in the future the tests will be delivered from 12 new multipurpose driving test centres. Delivery of car, lorry and bus driver testing will remain largely unchanged. Despite an overall reduction in the number of sites that deliver motorcycling tests in Scotland, the 12 new centres will ensure that, in line with the customer service criterion, 79 per cent. of the population will be within 45 minutes and 81 per cent. within 20 miles of a new centre.

We recognise the need to ensure that the more remote and sparsely populated areas have reasonable access to centres that conduct motorcycle tests. Every effort has been made to avoid disadvantaging the more rural and semi-rural populations, but we cannot justify providing sufficient multipurpose driving test centres to allow every test candidate in the country local access to those testing facilities. In the case of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, it is anticipated that the majority of motorcycling test candidates will travel to Inverness, which is a one-hour journey of about 39 miles. Car, lorry and bus candidates will continue to take their tests in Elgin.

On the question of the alleged safety aspects of the A96, I totally accept that when a local road has a reputation for danger, that has a knock-on effect on the confidence with which drivers will go down a road. I accept what the hon. Gentleman's constituent told him at his surgery. He will understand that when any assessment is made of the danger of any road, it has to be based on empirical evidence. I am not aware of any evidence to suggest that the A96 is such a dangerous road that it would preclude the location of those test facilities in Inverness. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that that was a matter for the Scottish Executive, and I am sure that he has better contacts than I do among the Ministers who are responsible for spending money on road safety schemes.

Driving test centres do not come cheap. Experience suggests that they cost some £1.8 million in development in addition to the costs of acquiring the site. Those costs are capitalised, but none the less they have a significant effect on fees paid by driving test candidates. In 2006-07, fewer than 250 motorcycling tests were conducted in Elgin, compared with 330 in Inverness and about 680 in Aberdeen.

Towards the end of his speech, the hon. Gentleman seemed to be saying that the number of tests carried out in Inverness is inflated because his constituents would rather wait for a shorter length of time to take their test in Inverness. At the same time, he made another argument, which I think was contradictory. He said that people are reluctant to travel the A96 because of the perceived danger of travelling on that road. One argument may be true, but I cannot see how both can be. People are either being encouraged to take their tests in Inverness or being discouraged from using the A96.

Angus Robertson: What is more important than either of those points is that when the Minister and his colleagues assess the demand for motorcycle tests, surely that should be based on the real demand in particular parts of the country, as opposed to figures that are suppressed and reduced in total because of the cap on test numbers for different parts of the country.

Mr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I would suggest that that is what the Government are doing. As I have said, in 2006-07, fewer than 250 motorcycling tests were conducted in Elgin, compared with 330 delivered one hour away along the A96 in Inverness and about 680 in Aberdeen. I am afraid that that number does not justify setting up a multipurpose driving test centre in Elgin. That is particularly so given the proximity of alternatives and the high cost of developing the facilities. Although the end of motorcycling tests in Elgin is regrettable, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that at present we have no plans to stop delivering other types of driving test in the town.

I accept the point of the hon. Gentleman's arguments. He is entitled as a constituency MP to continue the campaign. If he wishes to take part in the demonstration that is due to take place in his constituency next week, I look forward to his donning a motorcycle helmet and getting on a motorcycle for the first time in his career.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended until half-past Two o'clock.

Remploy Factory Closures (North-East)

Janet Anderson (in the Chair): In the event of a Division in the main Chamber, I shall suspend the sitting for 15 minutes, and for 10 minutes for any subsequent Divisions.

2.30 pm

Frank Cook (Stockton, North) (Lab): First, I wish to register my pleasure at opening this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs. Anderson. May I ask you to convey to Mr. Speaker my gratitude that I should have been afforded this opportunity? Normally when I speak in this Chamber, I occupy the Chair on which you sit. This is only the third time that I have initiated a debate here, and I say that with humility. The first was on police reorganisation, the second was on the reconfiguration of hospitals on Teesside and today's is on the closure of Remploy factories.

It is difficult to know where to start, because I have so much information that I could keep the debate going for three weeks. I do not want to keep it going—I want to come to some kind of resolution. I shall try to go through things in chronological order and, being a simple man, I shall do so in simple terms.

On 4 May I was visited in my constituency office by a John Waterhouse. I still have his card. He is the director of contract services of Remploy, and he came to put a case to me. He said in a letter to me that he was

"writing to inform you of the outcome of a period of intensive consultations with the trade unions over plans to modernise Remploy."

He went on to tell me how long the process had taken and how concerned Remploy was to ensure that individuals with certain incapacities and disabilities would be found suitable employment elsewhere—"mainstream employment", he called it. He said that Remploy would monitor that employment throughout and ensure that those people were not exploited in any way, and that they would have every benefit that they would normally get in a Remploy atmosphere.

That was all very assuring. I thought at the time, "This sounds a bit too good to be true," and, as my old granny used to say, "If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is." That is how it has turned out. Since then I have had so much conflicting information and so much that is patently misinformation that I felt compelled to request a second debate on the matter. There has already been a debate on it, and my hon. Friend the Minister had the problem of responding to it. I shall refer to her responses in due course.

After Mr. Waterhouse's charming onslaught, I received various contacts from trade unionists—Sean McGovern, John Thorman, Neville Anderson—and from the Stockton and district trades council. Most telling was the delegation that came to me from my local factory, which I know quite well. It must be 22 years ago, three years after I came into this place, that the staff there presented me with a quarter-bound, leather-bound book on the history of Stockton. I have to admit that I have never read it, but it is a beautiful piece of bookbinding, which I display on my bookshelf with pride.

Since then, the factory has changed its skills four times. On each occasion it has reskilled to an excellent standard and reports have been received saying that it has been excellent. In other words, it has done everything required of it to produce a revenue stream that justifies its existence. A delegation came to see me and, rather ironically, two of the delegation were a couple whose engagement party I had attended at the factory. The reason for my doing that was that the lady in the item had been one of my pupils when I was a schoolmaster many years ago. I know those people quite well, and they know me. For some reason, they trust me, which is why I am trying on their behalf today.

I got a letter from the leader of that delegation, a man called Rowland Precious—lovely name, isn't it?—who is ex-military. He had written to Mr. Bob Warner, but in his letter to me he wrote:

"We were informed, yesterday, that Remploy Stockton, is one of the proposed sites for closure. This proposal is based on incorrect information. The work it is based on is Scanning documents under the Offiscope Group of Remploy. Remploy, Stockton changed from Offiscope to e-Cycle a year ago. As a result we changed trade from Scanning to Computer recycling and we have been highly praised, by a number of senior managers".

In fact it was placed second in a group of 12 factories engaged in that work. It is not average, it is well above average.

Mr. Precious had felt so concerned about the threat of closure that he had written to Bob Warner—I suppose that I ought to explain to hon. Members, in case they do not know, that he is the chief executive of Remploy. I would not like to minimise his status—who is an important man. I do not think that he is disabled, although that might be debateable. Mr. Precious wrote to Mr. Warner:

"On 22 May...we were shown a video which informed us that Stockton factory was to close. A justification letter was read out that document preparation and scanning was no longer a viable business."

Document preparation and scanning? They were doing computers! It was not even relevant to the factory. He continued:

"We then informed the person sent to deliver this message that the information in it was both out of date and incorrect.

Stockton factory ceased scanning documents a year ago, (as part of Offiscope). We have very successfully been recycling computers...for the past year".

He went on to say that they

"would like to know why our closure has been based on out of date and incorrect information".

Choosing to ignore that kind of logic, Mr. Bob Warner wrote:

"I am sorry that the message read out...did not reflect the work that the factory is currently doing."

What kind of study had been carried out in order to justify the decision, given that he was sorry about it because he did not know about it? He continued:

"The proposal last Tuesday was the start of the consultation process and we will look again at the capacity requirement of the IT recycling"—

he got it right this time—

"as part of that process."

Well, the amount of consultation that has taken place on the Stockton factory from 30 May to date has been absolutely zero, but the manager left to go to another factory, ostensibly to conduct some business. In fact, it was for interview and he got a job elsewhere in the organisation and left the staff in Stockton to their own

devices. I am afraid that that is typical of the attitude that has been displayed throughout the process. It is an attitude that, I have to say, I did not join the Labour party or become an MP to defend. You can anticipate, Mrs. Anderson, that my words are hardly going to be complimentary from now on.

I shall not read out all Mr. Warner's correspondence, because it goes on—he is pretty good at turning out letters—but he wrote in April:

"We are convinced that our strategy is the right one. We also know that our view that Remploy should change is supported by the main disability charities."

That is another somewhat misleading claim. The charities that say that they support change are in favour of disabled people gaining mainstream employment, but they do not support that move at the cost of closing Remploy factories. It is mendacious to try to suggest that they do. Perhaps Mr. Warner learned from some of our colleagues how to represent, or misrepresent, actuality.

A month later, in May, Mr. Warner slightly changed his tack and stated:

"Remploy will be conducting a formal consultation programme with the trade unions over the summer. When this is completed we will need to finalise a submission to Ministers for approval and funding. The company would expect to be in a position to implement towards the end of the year."

That is a commitment, but what will he do with it?

In an attempt to put Mr. Warner back on the rails, Mr. Phil Davies, who is the secretary of the consortium of trade unions that is seeking to introduce some logic and compassion into the situation, sent a letter to Remploy. It is dated 1 June, before the last debate. Phil Davies stated:

"The information that the company has sent us falls far short of our legitimate expectations, it does not fulfil the consultation requirements and it is likely to expose the Remploy Board to further ridicule."

He says that he is appalled to learn that while Remploy intends to access

"some £88 million from the DWP Modernisation Fund a mere £8 million is to be used for retraining, job placement, support and counselling."

So what about the other £80 million? Mr. Davies goes on to state:

"Whereas 10 times that sum is earmarked to be spent on redundancy, early retirement packages...and maintaining Remploy terms and conditions".

A financial miscalculation has been made. If I had conducted my management responsibilities in industry before coming into this House in the way suggested in the letter, I would have been sacked out of hand. I would have had to throw my keys—the keys to the car as well—on the desk and leg it off the site.

Phil Davies goes on to state:

"In recent weeks you have been orchestrating a concerted campaign in the pages of the Guardian and elsewhere in an attempt to soften up MPs and the public in preparation of closures."

When I read that, I thought, "By God, he's right, and I was part of it." That was all the soft soap that I had from Mr. John Waterhouse on 4 May. I am somewhat ashamed that—because I wanted to think that things would be all right, that jobs would be available and that Remploy would be able to achieve what it was setting out to achieve—I thought the proposal was great and accepted it. Now I am finding out just how wrong I was.

The trade unions are not only criticising the situation. They put forward their own considered plan, on which they have spent some time. They asked Mr. Warner to co-operate with them by providing details, not a summary, of the full business case and the financial analysis, the losses and absentee rates for each of the 83 factories for each of the past two years, the idle and non-production time, the details of investment in the 83 factories, and an updated property portfolio. Phil Davies wrote:

"In your 22 May announcement, you stated that one of the selection criteria used was the prevailing local employment conditions."

That was sensible, was it not?

"You specifically mentioned that the two factories that otherwise would have been selected for closure were to be kept open due to high local unemployment...Please provide the local employment data that you have used against each of the 83 factories."

None of the information has been forthcoming.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): First, I must apologise to my hon. Friend that I have to leave to meet a Minister at 3.30 pm, but I congratulate him on securing this debate on Remploy. Has he ever seen a balance sheet for the Stockton factory? Indeed, does he know whether any Members have received transparent accounts for any of their Remploy factories? I certainly have not for the Bolton factory.

Frank Cook: The only way that I can answer that is to say that the employees, if we can use that term, at the Stockton factory have consistently posed questions to which they have never received clear answers. They have received obfuscation, evasion or silence.

I do not know whether there is any need to refer to the report by the group of MPs that has been reviewing the Remploy situation. MPs spent a lot of time making visits and applying their minds enthusiastically and clinically to some of the problems. They gave a list of things that needed to be done if Remploy is to sort out its remit. Remploy is justifying its decisions by saying that they are being imposed on it by the Government's requirement that it remain within a funding envelope of £555 million over the next five years. There are other ways of achieving that, and the unions have applied their minds and all their skills—they are not inexperienced—to the matter.

However, it seems that Remploy is not prepared to engage in such exchanges, despite the fact that the Minister—God bless her and save her—said on 13 June that

"the process has not failed. The trade unions and management will meet next week to discuss the proposals. I return to my earlier comment—there has been an extensive lead-in to the discussion of the proposals. At the moment, they are just proposals. Nothing has been confirmed."—[*Official Report*, 13 June 2007; Vol. 461, c. 318WH.]

I am most pleased about that, but engagement has not taken place because this is a dialogue of the deaf. Remploy is not listening. It is not participating in the conversation.

May I quote from a letter of 12 June, which was written the night before the Minister responded to the last debate? It is from Mr. Ray Fletcher of Bicester, Oxfordshire. I hope that he has not been flooded out. He states that he is writing as someone

"who worked as a member of the Board of Remploy for more than nine years...I have always believed that Remploy can play a

[Frank Cook]

significant part in achieving full inclusion of disabled people in UK society through the world of work and still feel that this is the case."

He states that we

"cannot be proud of a plan which will force disabled people from their existing jobs and is already increasing fear and anxiety amongst Remploy employees…there is no doubt in my mind that Remploy can change without the enforced closure of factories and without a loss of jobs amongst disabled people…I am particularly concerned that solutions being proposed for Remploy are far more impactive on the very people Remploy is there to support than anyone else."

Mr. Fletcher poses several questions:

"Can costs be reduced without loss of disabled people's jobs? Yes.

Is it possible to stay within the government's funding envelope and not close factories? Yes.

Can the factories be used as places for vocational rehabilitation and training and development of disabled people? Yes.

Is it possible to significantly increase progressions from factories? Yes.

Is it possible to align Remploy factories to the local community organisations of disabled people? Yes.

Is it possible to use the Remploy factories as a base for increasing access to Pathways to Work and other routes from benefit to work? Yes.

Is it possible to reconfigure Remploy's status so that it becomes more of an organisation of and for disabled people? Yes".

So why have we got this problem? He also says:

"I have to advise that I dealt directly with the Remploy trade unions for more than nine years and whilst we had many heated debates we managed to agree many significant changes through dialogue and discussion…It is my personal view that there is an alternative to the current plans for Remploy factories and it would be in everyone's interest for an alternative plan to be examined and committed to before embarking on a plan that would be negative for existing employees".

Words fail me. I say to the Minister—

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): You're doing all right. I don't think words are failing you.

Frank Cook: I am partially deaf.

Mr. Skinner: I am not from the north-east, but I am interested in this matter because I raised it at the Durham miners' rally when many of my hon. Friends and constituents of mine and other MPs were present. I also have a Remploy factory in my constituency that is due for closure. My hon. Friend said that his factory has changed four times. Feasibility studies should be done on the floods to see whether anything can be done to provide the wherewithal to deal with them in future. Feasibility studies should be done on climate change. That is a new thing on the horizon. But the main thing that I was told at Durham was that for people who go to work at Remploy, it is like joining a family, and they are members of a union. They resent the fact that they will not be part of a family and could finish up at McDonald's or a non-trade union firm. We have got to preserve the family, whether it is in Durham, Pinxton or wherever.

Frank Cook: I thank my hon. Friend for emphasising that point because when Rowland Precious, who is a highly intelligent and articulate gentleman, led a delegation to see me, he made exactly the same point and punched it home to great effect, raising in my mind another iniquitous aspect of the situation. He said, "You know, we aren't just disabled in one sense; some of us are disabled in many ways. There are all sorts of things; not just physical disabilities, but asthma, anxiety, hearing loss, sight impairment or other problems. It could be a combination of things, but we all help each other and we all know how to help each other."

It occurred to me that the management have all their capacities. I do not think any of the management are disabled; at least, I have not met anyone from the management who is. If we have people with the intelligence of Rowland Precious, why should he not be in a management position and be allowed to make management decisions with compassion for his fellow workers? Instead, we have people who are running around and changing their job because they see a threat on the horizon. They are moving out, or legging it. In politics I think that we call it "doing the chicken run". I am sure that we could run the Remploy organisation with people who have perfectly adequate grey cells and who would do it a good deal more effectively, efficiently and cheaply.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway) (Lab): Before my hon. Friend leaves the issue of the family nature of the factories, I, too, am not from the north-east, but I also have a Remploy factory that is due for closure and the family nature of the factory is apparent to people the minute they go into it and every time they visit it. My hon. Friend will be aware that much of this problem is based on a portmanteau statement that has come from the Government, which states as a matter of certainty that

"There is now an acceptance that disabled people"—

all disabled people—

"would prefer to work in mainstream employment alongside non-disabled people rather than in sheltered workshops".

I know my factory very well, and I find that a difficult statement to accept.

I have the following question for my hon. Friend. From the considerable research that he has done on the issue, is he aware of any Government figures on the costs that are bound to occur—not from employment benefit of one kind or another, but from health, social services, and psychiatric services—when this form of therapeutic employment comes to an end?

Frank Cook: The short answer to my hon. and learned Friend's question is no, I do not know.

The unions have called this answer a quick fix. I prefer a different phrase. I would call it finding the answer in the back of the book. Those involved have been given a proposal by the Government, but they have not sought to challenge, rationalise or justify it. They have some accountant who can probably add two and two together and make two and a bit and so they have said, "How do we do this? Well, we make a cut there, there, there and there and that is it". They have not even thought about the consequences or the justification for doing it.

I have a feeling in my water, Mrs. Anderson, and I hope that it does not discomfort you in the way that it discomforts me. I have a nasty suspicion that the Minister might turn around and say that the independent assessor that has been appointed and funded—I think that it is Grant Thornton—might have withdrawn support for the trade union proposals for consideration. I hope that the Minister does not say that because I have proof positive that it is not true. I would not like to have to demonstrate that. My dilemma, Mrs. Anderson, which you will know about as a fellow member of the Chairmen's Panel, is that, as members of the Panel, we have to be even more careful than the run-of-the-mill Member, if I can use that phrase.

Mr. Skinner: Oh aye.

Frank Cook: Oh aye. We cannot refer to lies or liars, but I have to say—and I refer only to part of the plethora of documentation that has come my way since I involved myself in the issue—that I have found more lies than could be counted on a calculator. It is really quite disgraceful and very annoying. I say to you, Mrs. Anderson, and through you to the Minister that the union's figures have been checked and verified right up until this Monday. I have had that incontrovertibly confirmed.

I want to give other hon. Members a chance to contribute, so I will finish in a moment. Before doing so, I wish to remind hon. Members why Remploy was started. It was founded immediately post-war as a means of providing constructive employment for men and women who came back from conflict and who were unable to go into mainstream unemployment—I think that that is the euphemism that people use. It has performed that task very well ever since.

At a time when young men and women are coming back from conflicts with a whole range of disabilities, I want hon. Members to consider the insanity of reducing budget provision—or, the funding envelope, as it is called. God, don't we come out with some euphemisms! Those young men and women previously came back from Bosnia and Kosovo and are now coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. The disabilities are going up and the budget is coming down; what kind of sense is that? What is the logic and how can it be justified? If anyone can answer that question, they will do me a great favour. However, I do not think that they will do so under the terms that we are considering today.

I started out by reminding the House that this is only the third debate that I have initiated in this Chamber. The first was on police reorganisation. We cannot take decisions here, but the debate had the desired effect and the Government changed their mind. The second debate that I initiated was on hospital reconfiguration. Again, of course, we could not take a decision, but the Government changed their mind once more. I am saying to the Minister now that this is another occasion on which, in God's name, and for everything that is good, reasonable and sensible, and for the sake of humanity, we must get the Government to change their mind—not immediately, but they should enter into a proper formal consultation.

Mr. Skinner: It's a different Government, Frank.

Frank Cook: Well, change is the order of the day.

The questions posed by the trade unions and those on the Remploy board should be answered in detail before any decision is made. The consultation must be a proper consultation and Remploy must listen, for the first time, to the logic put on the table for it to consider. My fear is that it does not have the intelligence to appreciate its value.

3.1 pm

Mr. Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I am very glad that the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) has raised this debate and brought to it his customary verve and eloquence. I hope that he maintains his success rate and that the proposals are changed.

We had a debate in Westminster Hall not long ago to which the Minister present responded. This debate, however, rightly focuses on the particular difficulties faced in the north-east as a result of the closure of Remploy factories. My concern is for my constituents, both present and future, for whom the Ashington factory is their Remploy factory. It is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy). I know that he will be seeking to catch your eye shortly, Mrs. Anderson, and that, like me, he will want to mention the special circumstances of Northumberland.

I can say for both of us that this is not a very good day for central Government attention to the special circumstances of Northumberland. They have just taken a decision that was the opposite of that sought by every Northumberland MP and district council, whatever their party. We have not got off to a very good start today, but I am sure that the Minister will be more understanding. That was a decision about local government, however, and now we are on to Remploy, on which we can perhaps make a bit more progress.

The circumstances of Northumberland are special. Even given today's improved employment conditions compared with those of a decade or more ago, it remains very difficult to get jobs in Northumberland. The situation is made worse by the fact that great distances are involved for many people. Certainly, those in my constituency, who do not live in Ashington and must travel to the factory, often need significant help in doing so because of their disabilities. They have even greater difficulties seeking jobs elsewhere.

I understand the basic argument behind the Government's policy, which is the attempt to deploy resources for securing employment for those with disabilities in a way that will aid the largest possible number of disabled people. Clearly many of those people are not employed at the moment and will not be employed in Remploy sheltered workshops. There must be a way of assisting them all. I can see a certain logic to that, but, if I was going to try to develop such a policy, I certainly would not start in Northumberland, but would look to an area with a wide range of job opportunities or, indeed, a strong demand for labour and, therefore, much greater potential for seeking appropriate employment that takes account of a person's particular disabilities and is adapted to suit them. Northumberland is not in that situation. It is a difficult place to find employment.

When we last debated this matter in the House, I asked about that, and the Minister told me to talk to the chief executive of Remploy. I went one better and had a meeting with its chairman, who actually is a very reasonable

[Mr. Alan Beith]

and intelligent man. We had a very constructive and useful discussion, from which some rather interesting points emerged that I hope the Minister can perhaps clarify, confirm or give her view on. One of those points was that unless jobs are found for existing Remploy employees at the Ashington factory—other than for those who retire early voluntarily or who retire because they are approaching retirement age—and for potential Remploy employees of the future, he could not make a case to the Minister for the closure of that factory, in which case, the programme would have to be re-jigged.

If the Government are to achieve the same number of closures, they will have to look somewhere else. That might very well be the case in Northumberland. I hope that the Minister will make it clear to Remploy that she does not want proposals based on anything other than absolute certainty that not only can existing Remploy employees find or be found jobs, but that there will be considerable and clear routes into many more jobs in the future. I do not think that that is currently the position.

It also became clear in our discussion that Remploy will have targets for employing disabled people. The trouble is that Remploy will make considerable progress towards achieving its targets in parts of the country with a more favourable employment situation. It could then say to the Minister, "Look, we are getting some way towards our targets"—we hear that about a lot of targets these days. However, that will conceal the fact that it is not anywhere near its target for Northumberland. There might be a feeling, therefore, that the programme is going quite well when actually it is going very badly in an area where employment is difficult to find.

In some parts of the country, it is much easier to find employment generally—not just for disabled people—because of the expansion of particular kinds of businesses. That has not been the case in Northumberland. For example, I talked to a lot of people from ex-mining communities who have had more opportunities for re-employment—although not as well paid—than have those in ex-mining communities in Northumberland. Let us look at South Yorkshire, for example, where there has been a huge development in warehousing because of the proximity of motorways, which offers opportunities of a kind that we do not have. Account must be taken of different circumstances in different parts of the country.

Then we discussed what would happen if the closure went ahead, and there was talk of a continuing presence in Northumberland, but that will not do anything if all it means is a shop front in Ashington with a sign in the window that reads: "You can call in here if you have a disability". Most of my constituents who work at the Remploy factory could not get to Ashington without help from that sheltered-workshop environment—in many cases, they do not have that degree of mobility. If Remploy was not providing sheltered employment, every penny of that resource, and more, would need to be used to ensure that a wide range of people in Northumberland and the adjoining area of Tyne and Wear were being helped into employment. Any continuing presence, therefore, must involve at least serious training, rehabilitation and mentoring commitments and facilities, if it is to balance the losses.

Those who work in the Remploy factory appreciate its value, but if they were to consider the future of other disabled people, or those who become disabled, whether through industrial accidents or military circumstances, such as those described by the hon. Member for Stockton, North, they will say, "They have not had the advantage that I had." They have been speaking very much in those terms. They appreciate what they have had from working at Remploy, and they want others to have a similar benefit in the future. They are deeply depressed and distressed by the chain of events that seems to be unfolding.

If there is merit in and scope for the kind of transfer that Remploy has talked about, frankly, we should not pilot it in an area in which employment circumstances are as difficult as those in Northumberland. I hope that this programme will be rethought and that much more account will be taken of the circumstances in our area.

3.9 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) on securing this debate, which without a doubt is an important one because it concerns employment opportunities that have existed since the second world war for those with disabilities. These people feel incredibly vulnerable and they regularly feel that they are at the back end when any opportunity is identified.

For me, however, the debate has a second flavour and it is important because we inevitably—the word is inevitably—look at people with disabilities and define them as such. We do not ask, "What are your abilities? What would you like to be trained to do? Which employment could you play a part in?" It is long gone that we should be talking about people as people with disabilities, because these people have clear abilities.

The report on Stockton Remploy made some clear statements. It noted, as my hon. Friend said, that the work force were flexible and would change from one productive activity to another. It also noted that they showed an incredible ability to develop very specific skills requiring great care and dexterity, which could be used in many different ways. This is not a group of people with no skills—they have serious skills.

On 15 June, I spoke to constituents who work in Stockton Remploy and I was struck by their abilities. Many of us in the House could learn from their speaking skills. They were focused, determined and challenging, and they had clear intellectual competence. Why do we believe that we have no opportunities to use their capabilities better?

Some of those who came to see me had definite vulnerabilities. Many had worked at Stockton Remploy for more than 20 years and many had never been anywhere else in employment terms. Many had worked alongside those who were at the meeting with them for more than 10 years. There was comfort, support and a sense of trust, and those things are important when people have disabilities. One person told me with great sincerity, "I'm not laughed at by my colleagues. When they don't understand what I'm saying, they ask me to say it again." That is the careful way in which a good relationship opens and develops. Remploy offers not only employment, but friendship networks, and it is important that we understand that, rather than understate or undermine it.

The other thing that came through during the meeting with these people, who were clearly capable and adaptable, was that management had let them down, misinformed them about some things and not informed them about others. Communication between the work force and the management took place rarely, if ever, and the implication, once again, was that management were not taking these people seriously. The attitude seemed to be that they had disabilities, so managers could treat them as they chose, which is not the way that any of us in this room would choose to be treated or would accept.

Those at the meeting went on to say that they had given loyal service and that the only time they had not been at work was when they were ill and had been signed off. They believed that the factory was making a profit, but they are sure that the premises have been put up for sale during the 90 days' consultation. They also believed that the management had long ago stopped looking for contracts to encourage the work force to do different work or more of the same.

We should remember that the work force take apart IT systems. These days, every home has one or two such systems, as do schools and factories, and they are changed every two years. A vast amount of work is involved in taking IT systems apart, so the work force and I are wondering why there were not more contracts when everybody is saying that IT systems are an inevitable part of people's lives, which everyone uses.

I could not understand why members of the work force believed that the factory was profitable if it was not, so I challenged the management, as hon. Members would expect me to. I got back a statement saying that the factory had lost £704,000 during 2006-07—that is the claim that the management are making. They also claim that there is no option but to close. My second question, therefore, is did the factory suddenly make a loss of £704,000? Was there no sign that things were not going well? Was the factory not getting sufficient work in? Was the working group not good enough? If so, were the management communicating that to the work force? The straight fact is that they did not. No one was warned or given the opportunity to put right something that was possibly wrong. Management have an awful lot to answer for.

Of course, I have pursued this issue not only with management, but with the Employment Service, because I am told that it is now on the case. In fact, it is not on the case. This is a 90-day consultation, so my 40 constituents who are employed at Remploy could find in November that the 90 days are up and there are no jobs. Is that the way we conduct our affairs? I do not think so. I do not think that that is the Labour way and I do not think that it is my hon. Friend the Minister's way. Things have been botched, and Remploy has so much to answer for. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North has gone through the letters that he received, and I am now listening with serious concern to people who are employed at Remploy. The question that I am asking is, "Who has been saying what to whom?"

When I spoke to the Employment Service, it certainly wanted to reassure me. It said, "We will do a one-to-one with everybody in the factory when and if it closes. We will attempt to find out people's talents and place people in employment." I have no criticism of the Employment Service in that respect, but the fact of the matter is that it is not engaged, and we are into the 90 days. My people on the shop floor believe that the 90-day consultation is simply an academic exercise that will achieve nothing. It is not about what happens next or in the future, but about how the management can close the factory as quietly as they can get away with. Well, they must have heard today that that will not happen.

I lobby hard in the House for the blind and the partially sighted. I work hard with them and they are a great group of people with tremendous abilities. I work with the European regional development fund and the European single programme fund, and those I work with also have their own programme—the VISAGE programme. What approach is Remploy taking to get other, different people more involved in Remploy Stockton? I see no evidence of any approach.

I have had excellent discussions with the Minister, who knows that we are anxious about the proposals. I am well aware that we have spent more than £20 million with Remploy in an attempt to achieve profitable, good employment—indeed, just good employment—but not one additional person has entered Remploy's doors over that period. None of my blind people is ever encouraged to be part of Remploy, and no one engages with them. We are spending money and we want to see better employment, but the fact is that we are not seeing any.

There are lots of questions, and I hope that the Minister will understand where we are coming from and give us answers. We are into new times and we have a new Government. We have an absolute commitment to treat people with dignity and to ensure that they enjoy equality. We want businesses to work and we want to ensure that management know that.

We are in new times, with a new determination. I ask the Minister whether there is a chance to pull back and see whether and how we can ensure that the management structure of Remploy will deliver, as its employees deliver. I think that we would then find that the House would be satisfied, and that the conclusions of that consultation and that approach would be acceptable to us all. Better still—better than all the hon. Members present being satisfied—the conclusions would be satisfactory to the people employed in Remploy today. That is our main concern.

Janet Anderson (in the Chair): I shall call as many hon. Members as I can fit into the time, but I urge them to be as brief as possible, because I want to give the Minister and the Front-Bench spokesmen time to speak as well.

3.20 pm

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook), who, typically, has raised this issue on behalf of his constituents. I have known the man since I got into Parliament and I know how assiduous he has been in his duties, and about fighting for the people he represents. Well done to him again.

I have been a regular visitor over the years since my election at the Remploy factory in Jarrow, which has been identified for closure. It has always been a

[Mr. Stephen Hepburn]

pleasure to visit. As has already been mentioned, there are no moans or whinges. Members of Parliament go to many factories and meet many people and employees. There is always a group in each place with a gripe or a grievance. Not in Remploy. It is a happy place, where the people get on with their job and do a good job for the community. It has been in existence for some 50 years now. The factory does similar work to two other plants in the country—at Derby and Longbenton—making textiles for car seats. There are 36 staff, who have great experience. They have a tremendous spread of skills, such is the diversification that they have had to undertake over the years to change jobs and become involved in other work.

When I have visited, I have met senior staff and management. When the review was announced I met, on the site, senior management who had come up from Manchester. I received the impression that they were not overly concerned. They said, "No one can promise you anything, but Jarrow can wash its face compared with many other plants in the country," so there was not really a problem, and we relayed that to a mass meeting of the work force. I was honestly shocked when I found out that it was to be closed, because those were not the vibes or messages that I had been getting.

I thought about it. I thought that there must be a reason for what was happening. Was it because Jarrow did not have the disability statistics required for a Remploy plant? Certainly that was not true of the plant itself, because of the 36 people employed there 32 are registered disabled; and it was certainly not true of Jarrow and South Tyneside because more than 10,000 people there are registered with a disability. That box was not ticked. I wondered whether it was something about the economy. Was it that there was a booming jobs programme in Jarrow, so that those disabled people could easily be moved out into the wider economy and get jobs? That is nonsense. In South Tyneside we have nearly double the national average for unemployment. There are no places for those people to go. Another statistic is that four out of every 10 kids in South Tyneside have no parent in work.

Frank Cook: Will my hon. Friend take into account the fact that 50 per cent. of job placements made by Remploy have lasted less than six months because the individuals could not stay the pace in mainstream employment?

Mr. Hepburn: That is a relevant point, and the whole reason for starting up Remploy in the first place. I met Bob Warner, the chief executive, and he seemed to be a very sincere man. We discussed the review and my concerns, and I admit, having listened to my hon. Friend, that I was a bit soft-soaped as well: we would find jobs for the people at the factory and sort them out with other places.

I thought, "If Jarrow is way out of line with the rest of the country—if the subsidies going into Jarrow are ridiculous—maybe there is a point." I said my ta-ra's and farewells, and said, "Can you put it in writing?" which he did. When I got the letter it said

"we therefore plan to concentrate on the two larger factories and cease production at Jarrow."

There was nothing in it about efficiencies, business plans or anything of the kind. There was no sense of that.

I got in touch with the trade unions, and among them no one is saying that one plant should stay open at the expense of another. The trade unions have been working with me because they want to expose the folly of the exercise that has gone on under the Remploy management.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): On the trade unions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) mentioned the Back-Bench group's independent investigation, and the charitable organisations that it is claimed support the proposals. Those organisations gave evidence at the inquiry—I was a member of the Back-Bench group—and, on persistent and robust questioning, they conceded that they had not consulted anyone in Remploy prior to pledging their support. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the trade unions who represent the Remploy work force, and not those organisations that claim to represent their views?

Mr. Hepburn: That is a very good point. We all look to the Remploy management to look after its employees, but once again it has been proved that in this country—in any society—it is the trade unions that look after working people, and not the management.

The trade unions said to me that if I wanted a case for Jarrow—and no one was saying that one plant should close or anything like that—the cost per year for each employee in Jarrow is £16,000. The two plants that are staying open at the expense of Jarrow have a higher cost per year. In the south, there are subsidies ranging up to £28,000 a year for employees in factories that are staying open under the closure programme. There are 28 factories that are not closing that have a higher cost per year than Jarrow. There are plants staying open that have even been proved by the unions to have a less skilled work force than the Jarrow one; such things happen in many plants when it has been necessary to move on, reskill and do different things. Also, in other plants, there have been significant managerial and staffing issues, which have been well publicised in the press.

No case has been made for the closure of the Jarrow plant on the basis of efficiency, disability figures or economics. We must ask what on earth is going on. Can we not, at this late stage, stop this whole silly programme, and get the Minister to put a halt to it? There is a new Government. We are now talking about open scrutiny and pre-legislative scrutiny. Why not put the matter to a Select Committee and let us look at it sensibly? It has to stop; and it has to stop here today.

3.28 pm

Mr. Denis Murphy (Wansbeck) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) on securing the debate and, more importantly, on comprehensively taking apart the Remploy board's arguments for closure.

I want to concentrate my remarks in the few minutes that I have left on the Ashington factory in my constituency. The factory employs some 60 disabled people and sits in the centre of an area of relatively high unemployment.

It is a former mining area, and, to be fair to the Government, they have invested substantial sums of money in the past 10 years, which are starting to make a difference. Unfortunately, however, the local economy is still quite fragile.

Most of the current jobs in Remploy are in manufacturing. The Ashington site manufactures wheelchairs, but the work force are flexible enough to be able to change that almost overnight, if required. We have lost an awful lot of manufacturing jobs recently: the Dewhurst factory, which is right next door to the Remploy factory, closed recently with the loss of 450 jobs; Lite-On, a company that manufactures power transformers, closed recently with the loss of 90 jobs; two chemical companies closed recently with the loss of 250 jobs; and a local foundry closed some six months ago with the loss of 157 manufacturing jobs. I could go on and on.

The rationale behind the closure of the Ashington factory was, apparently, that there were sufficient jobs in the local economy to accommodate all the people displaced from Remploy by the closure. An appraisal was supposed to have taken place before the closure announcement was made. I put it to the Minister that no such appraisal could possibly have taken place in the Ashington area. I checked the situation with the jobcentre at 2.15 pm. There are currently vacancies for three permanent manufacturing jobs and one temporary one in the whole of the Ashington jobcentre area, which covers the majority of south-east Northumberland. I would be interested to know what work the Remploy board carried out to assess whether jobs are available elsewhere. I genuinely support the Government in trying to assist disabled people into mainstream employment, but that should not be at the expense of the disabled people currently employed in the Remploy factory.

Following the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn), I should mention that there are above average levels of people on incapacity benefit in my area. Indeed, the number of people on incapacity benefit and disability benefit is 60 per cent. higher in my constituency than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Also, as was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), many of whose constituents work in the Remploy factory in Ashington, the factory covers a huge geographical area—indeed, it is the only Remploy factory in the whole of Northumberland. The rest of south-east Northumberland has exactly the same problems as my constituency.

The Remploy factory in Ashington is a centre of excellence for training. Ashington has developed an excellent learning centre in partnership with the learning and skills council. It has developed a training and conference suite with state-of-the-art information technology equipment. It is working closely with disabled employees, and 20 of them are in training for performance machine operations at national vocational qualification level 2. Eight employees are doing NVQ level 2 in literacy and numeracy through learndirect in order that they may move into IT training.

Remploy has entered into a contract with Business Link to provide 16 employees with a European computer driving licence course. That will be delivered by the GMB union on-site. Five employees have just returned from training with the Sunderland enterprise training association in highly skilled MIG and TIG—metal inert gas and tungsten inert gas—welding and completed their full safety appraisal in brazing and welding. There is a wide range of other specialist courses for employees: safety in relation to abrasive wheels, jig and fixture manufacture, robotic welding, NVQ level 3 in IT and much more. That training is even offered to the families of those employed in the Ashington factory.

We should not be closing the factory; we should be expanding it. It is a first-class facility. I am mindful of the time, but I ask the Minister to stop the closure programme and press for continued production at the Ashington factory. We should expand the training section on-site at Ashington and not allow it to close. As the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed has said, people from the rest of Northumberland will not travel to a shop in Ashington. It is essential that we keep the site where it is and maintain the facility for the people who are employed there and for the other people who could use it. It would be a first-class centre for other disabled people in Northumberland to use as a training facility to move into employment.

3.33 pm

Hugh Bayley (City of York) (Lab): Remploy's York factory employs 52 people. I have visited it many times. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) said, Remploy is a family. People get more than just employment; they get companionship, friendship and social support.

I was very disappointed to learn in May that my local factory was scheduled for closure. Earlier, I had been told that the company might reduce the volume of manufacturing in York but replace it with other measures to find work for disabled people, and I support the new measures that Remploy proposes to take to get larger numbers of disabled people into mainstream employment. However, I do think that the Remploy management have misunderstood and underestimated the difficulties that existing employees will face in making the move. Many of them have worked in the factory for a long time. Some could possibly make do in mainstream employment, but they would lose the support and companionship that they have had for many years from their work colleagues in Remploy factories. If any of them do move into other employment, it is extremely important that they are not separated into ones and twos, but that contracts are negotiated with local employers to take five or six people, so that they go out together.

It is absolutely essential in a place such as York that manufacturing of some kind continues, because some people will be unable to move into mainstream employment and, although the company has offered a very generous package to maintain for life the salary that they currently receive, if people do not have a job to go for, they do not have a meaningful life ahead of them.

Last August, when it was clear that some change was in the wind in Remploy, I asked for Remploy to meet City of York council and to examine the possibility of finding alternative premises for a manufacturing base for disabled people in York. I still urge them to do that. City of York council has its own factory for disabled people in York. Why does not Remploy go into partnership with it, buy a 50 per cent. stake and provide opportunities to work in a similar environment for Remploy workers who cannot move into mainstream employment?

[Hugh Bayley]

I am very grateful to you, Mrs. Anderson, for giving me a few minutes in which to speak before the winding-up speeches at the end of the debate. I have no time to say more, but I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider what will happen to those for whom mainstream employment is not a realistic option.

Janet Anderson (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for keeping his contribution brief. I have now been able to call all those who put in a request to speak. I am sorry, but we must move on to the speeches by those on the Front Benches.

3.36 pm

Paul Rowen (Rochdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) on securing the debate. He and other hon. Members spoke with great passion and feeling on what is a very important issue. All of us must be conscious that we are talking about the lives and employment of a considerable number of people—more than 2,500 disabled people, whose life chances and prospects are nowhere near as great as those of other members of society. We must be conscious that in any community, and particularly in some of the communities that we have heard about this afternoon, any jobs are very hard to find and to replace. I understand that finding mainstream employment for disabled people, independent living and equality are ideals worth fighting for and working towards. However, that should not and cannot be used as an excuse to close factories where many people—I am told that half the people are over 50—have worked for many years.

I was very disappointed when I heard the hon. Member for Stockton, North speak about the lack of proper consultation and the fact that a proper business case has not been presented to show what will happen to Remploy over the next few years. I hope that the Minister can answer that. I want Remploy to change and develop, not only for current employees but for future employees. I would like it to develop and provide training opportunities for many more disabled people. However, it cannot do that if an area such as the north-east, where there is greater than average unemployment, faces such large-scale closures.

We have to be conscious of what the way forward is. I will not speak for long, because I think that it is more important that we listen to the Minister, but I believe that there can be a way forward that is constructive and that moves Remploy into spending the resources that the Government say are available. If, as the hon. Member for Stockton, North says, the unions have a plan, that should be the plan that we follow.

I hope that the Minister will take account of hon. Members' comments and come up with a plan that will move Remploy forward and ensure that its disabled employees, many of whom have been there for many years and have little chance of gaining other meaningful employment, particularly in the manufacturing sector, can have a future.

3.40 pm

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mrs. Anderson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) on securing the debate. He mentioned three previous Westminster Hall debates that he secured; I well remember the first, on police reorganisation, in which I spoke, and I congratulate him on the success that it had in changing Government policy. I fear that he will be less happy with my remarks today. All hon. Members have spoken with considerable passion and have shown their local knowledge about their constituents who are employed by Remploy. I shall try to keep my remarks relatively brief to allow the Minister to deal with the many specific points that Members have raised.

I am familiar with these issues, as I have a Remploy factory in my constituency, albeit a small one, and I have been engaging with the Remploy management. My experience has been different from those of other hon. Members, as I have found the management to be very open and transparent. My local factory was slated for closure, but a local solution has been found to place its employees with another organisation that will take over the factory and secure their jobs. Local managers have worked incredibly hard on that, but I am aware that in other parts of the country, particularly those with larger facilities, that sort of solution might not be possible.

We support the principle of reform. The Government have had the challenge of spending a limited amount of money on trying to secure the move of more disabled employees into mainstream employment. However, while we support the principle, we have some questions for the Minister, and I hope that she will address them in her remarks as well as dealing with specifics.

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and I met the chief executive of Remploy to discuss some of these issues before today's debate. It would be helpful if the Minister set out the age profile of the Remploy employees who are affected and the types of disabilities that they have, and compared them to those whom Remploy has successfully placed in mainstream employment. Members have voiced their concerns about whether the employees who would be affected by the proposed closures could be found jobs in mainstream employment. Remploy has guaranteed their terms and conditions, including their final salary pension schemes, and that is welcome, but it is important that in addition to those financial security guarantees they have meaningful, valued work to do rather than just receiving payments. I know that that is also important to the Minister. It would be helpful if she outlined for those employees who might be affected by closure what will happen if they cannot be placed in mainstream employment. What possible solutions do she and Remploy envisage for their future employment if it is not to be in a commercial, mainstream organisation?

One or two Members asked about opportunities for using public procurement in terms of new business opportunities. The trade unions have also raised that issue and written to all Members. Will the Minister touch on that point? In the public sector, much is spent on people rather than on purchasing services, so I am not sure, at first glance, how significant a business opportunity that is. However, I want to make sure that both Remploy and the Minister have considered it, just to check that every avenue is being investigated.

Many hon. Members mentioned the consultation process that is under way, which is due to finish in August. Final proposals will then go from Remploy to the Minister in early September. What are the Minister's plans for making a final decision? Will it be

done before the House returns in October, or does she plan to wait until we are back to announce it to the House?

The hon. Member for Stockton, North mentioned our veterans, particularly those who have served in current conflicts, and I agree with some of his comments in that regard. In my previous role as the shadow Minister for Veterans, I had the opportunity to visit such young men at Selly Oak and Headley Court. I met and talked to some very young men who have been tremendously damaged in serving our country, and the spirit and courage in their characters was truly inspirational. I just wanted to make those points, given that the hon. Gentleman had raised the issue. With that, I draw my comments to a close to allow the Minister to deal with the wide-ranging issues that have been raised.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mrs. Anne McGuire): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Frank Cook) on securing his third debate in Westminster Hall on an issue that is important to us all. I do not declare an interest, as such, but I, too, have a Remploy factory in my constituency. Like many hon. Members present, I am a frequent visitor to my local factory and I know the level of skill and commitment among the work force and management there.

It is worth remembering why Remploy was established after the second world war. As my hon. Friend reminded us, it was set up to provide rehabilitation for injured servicemen and women. The aim was to provide development and training through work to enable disabled workers to return to mainstream employment. It was not necessarily meant to be a place of permanent employment for those servicemen and women, who, with the commitment that they brought from the second world war, wanted to get back into mainstream employment. Today, Remploy has 83 sites and employs about 5,000 disabled people across a range of sectors, including textiles, the manufacture of office furniture, bookbinding and IT work. However, the progression from Remploy factories into mainstream employment is very low: only 19 people made that progression last year. If we are to reflect on Remploy's ethic, we must consider what is happening.

In the past 60 years, the nature of the Remploy factory has changed very little in the face of globalisation, the growth of the service sector and other impacts on the economy. We must consider the changes that the combination of new technology and our having the most far-reaching disability rights legislation in Europe have made to the lives of disabled people. At the invitation of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), I have visited some of the voluntary organisations that she supports, such as Action for Blind People, and seen how technology has changed the way that many blind people work in the mainstream. They can now work in a way that was not envisaged many years ago. I see that my hon. Friend is nodding in agreement.

For the past two years, not just since May, we have been engaged in a discussion about how to modernise Remploy, taking into account that we want to get more disabled people into employment and that more disabled people want to be in employment. We are also considering how to manage that expectation and how to use the undoubted skills of Remploy to support that ambition. We talk about Remploy as if it is only about the factory network, but it is not. Some 5,000 people are employed in Remploy factories, but nearly another 5,000 people are supported by Remploy out in mainstream employment—they are placed there year in, year out.

I should like to clarify the situation. A misinterpretation has perhaps been given that somehow the people in mainstream employment are there only for a few weeks or a few months at a time. In fact, Remploy has a good record of sustaining people in mainstream employment. Given that we have touched on the figures, I should say that we are talking about in excess of three years in mainstream employment, and that is not a bad record. We are not talking about the 40 years of the Remploy factory, but the employment prospects and employment profile of disabled people are changing, in much the same way as the employment of non-disabled people is.

I must gently say to colleagues that disabled people have the same ambitions and aspirations as non-disabled people: they want to be able to choose what they want to do. If I were a disabled person in Stirling and I had an opportunity to go to Remploy, as my only option I would have to want to be a machinist. That is a noble profession, as I appreciate when I see people, mainly women, in my Remploy factory doing sophisticated pieces of sewing to make chemical suits and protection suits for police and our service personnel, but what if I did not want to be a machinist and I wanted to do something else? The only option in the Remploy complex in my area—I am sure that we could examine every single other area—in some ways limits the opportunities for disabled people, and that is why we need to modernise.

The ambitions and aspirations of disabled people have changed dramatically because of some of the fantastic things that this Government have done. We have opened up opportunities, opened up a rights agenda and opened up employment, and we have supported disabled people in employment.

Frank Cook *rose—*

Mrs. McGuire: I shall take an intervention, given that my hon. Friend initiated the debate, but I want to reply properly to the points made in it.

Frank Cook: I just want the Minister to know that I do not think that anybody present would have any argument or dispute with what is being said. We would all agree fully with the claims that are being made. What we need to get out of today is whether she is prepared to ensure that the right kind of consultation is conducted before the end of consultation period—it must be clear, transparent and open, everything must be laid on the table and a business case must be expressed.

Mrs. McGuire: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me that hook to move on in my contribution. The consultation on Remploy, the discussion with colleagues in the House and the way in which we have conducted the business of the modernisation of Remploy have all been done in open and transparent way.

[Mrs. McGuire]

Colleagues present were at previous meetings, in which I was the Minister, when we presented the situation that we were facing with Remploy. This is not about a budget cut, because we are maintaining Remploy's budget. Some £115 million a year, times five over the period—a guarantee of £555 million, or some half a billion pounds—will go to support Remploy. We put all of that and the PricewaterhouseCoopers report on the table for our colleagues. We put the report on the website so that there was no doubt that when that independent assessment was conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Dr. Stephen Duckworth, who is an independent disability employment adviser, everyone was well aware of the challenges.

My hon. Friend mentioned that he felt that the trade unions have not perhaps had the opportunity to engage in the issue. I hope that he will accept the comments that I am about to make. Since last July, when I made a statement to the House, there have been 10 meetings of the joint working party to discuss the modernisation plans. Nothing was on the table and open discussion with our trade union colleagues—with the consortium—took place on 10 separate occasions.

Separately, the company has funded the unions' own meetings, which have run to a minimum of nine. Remploy has also paid Grant Thornton to support the trade unions—about £100,000 was involved in that. The company has provided substantial extra data every time that they have been requested by the trade union consortium, except data that are personal and commercially confidential. Since 22 May, formal consultation meetings have taken place. There have been weekly meetings between Remploy and the trade unions—I believe that one is taking place as we sit here today.

I believe that the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Rowen) mentioned that he had met the chairman of Remploy, although it might have been my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Hugh Bayley) who said that. The chairman of Remploy has had meetings with all the general secretaries of the Remploy trade unions, and the trade unions gave two presentations to the board—again, things are being done in an open and transparent way. The chairman met the leaders of the trade union consortium, Phil Davies and Jennie Formby, prior to the announcement on 22 May.

The fact that there is not a balance sheet for factories has been highlighted, but Remploy has given all the relevant financial information and, as I have said, meetings are held on a weekly basis. It has given the profit and loss accounts for factories and the balance sheet for businesses. I hope that colleagues will recognise that within one Remploy factory there may be different businesses; they are not all doing the same thing.

I have a few minutes left to talk about a complex subject, one that has generated a great deal of anguish among Remploy workers. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for City of York mentioned the package that has been put together to support Remploy employees if the proposals are accepted—these are currently only proposals presented by the board. One of the reasons why it is difficult to get local solutions is that we need to get a discussion going about the proposals. We must start to engage, so that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) can have highlighted some of the issues in his area, and so that the powerful case on the training facilities that Remploy can offer, made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy), can be made as part of the modernisation programme.

I have said on other occasions in this House that I hope that hon. Members will engage with the consultation, but I also make a plea to them. I see more trade union officials or former trade union officials in this Chamber than one could shake a stick at, especially compared with most other debates in this House. Those colleagues know that when one enters a negotiation, one goes in to discuss things. If we are to have a meaningful consultation and negotiation, I ask us all to encourage that discussion. We have to modernise Remploy, but we are not cutting the budget. Indeed, the Secretary of State has said that he will give more money to modernise Remploy. We need to modernise it so that we can get far more disabled people into work. I hope that we should all be able to take some pride in that.

Land Maintenance Companies

3.59 pm

Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Lab): It is a great honour and a privilege to be an elected MP, but with that privilege come responsibilities and rights. One of those responsibilities is that we should be measured in our contributions when we are talking about constituency issues or companies that are causing concern. I shall talk about Greenbelt Group Ltd, which is a discreditable building company whose performance and behaviour has been a disgrace.

As you are aware, Mrs. Anderson, as part of the planning process, developers must provide open spaces on new estates and show that plans are in place for the long-term care of those estates. In the past, open spaces were managed by local authorities, but in recent years the onus for maintaining such areas has fallen on developers. They have tended to offload that responsibility in one of two ways. They have transferred ownership of the land and responsibility for maintaining it either to the local authority, a democratically elected body, or to the home owners. Home owners have been obliged to appoint a factor; if the factor failed, they could be fired and another company could be appointed. Both arrangements gave home owners control, but a worrying new trend is emerging, and urgent action is needed to avert a crisis that could affect tens of thousands of home owners throughout the UK.

Mr. David Hamilton (Midlothian) (Lab): I found out this week that some of my constituents in Loanhead are having similar problems. Will my hon. Friend discuss with me after this debate how best I can help my constituents?

Mr. Devine: I shall be delighted to help my hon. Friend to deal with the company and its performance and behaviour.

Some major developers, such as Bryant Homes, Gladedale, Persimmon, and Wimpey, are transferring ownership of open spaces and the sole right to manage them to a single private provider: Greenbelt Group Ltd. Developers are awarding Greenbelt the exclusive right for all time to charge home owners for managing open spaces on new estates. Home owners are bound by conditions in the title deeds to pay the company an annual fee for maintaining open spaces on estates. In some cases, that payment is nearly £400 a year. In return, Greenbelt is obliged to look after open spaces to the standards outlined in the title deeds. However, emerging evidence shows that the company is failing to meet its obligations on many estates.

Greenbelt claims to manage various estates throughout the UK—I shall return to the number—but at least 11 are in my constituency, and constituents on every one of those estates are reporting problems. They tell me that Greenbelt continually fails to carry out maintenance work to the standard outlined in the title deeds. Greenbelt is extremely difficult to engage with, and complaints have been dismissed or ignored. The company's management practices are poor.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): Earlier this week, my office was contacted by a company purporting to represent Greenbelt following my inquiries to determine whether Greenbelt had any contracts in my constituency. Although I did not take the call personally, I got the impression from my staff member that the company representing Greenbelt accepted that its communication standards had fallen woefully short in the past, but said that it was taking steps to address the problem. Is that the experience of my hon. Friend and his constituents?

Mr. Devine: That is a helpful contribution. When we are in court, I hope that I can use my hon. Friend as a witness.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): The possibility of ending up in court is intriguing. My hon. Friend and other hon. Members may be aware that until this week I had two issues with Greenbelt in my constituency, and through my hon. Friend's actions I understand that I now have three. In association with what he has just said, does he agree that there is no clear and solid working relationship between Greenbelt and residents? Residents are often confused, irrespective of what the title deeds say. Who looks at title deeds every week or every year? Residents are confused about who is responsible for green spaces, and in some instances, the local authority is also confused.

Mr. Devine: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point, and I want to develop that argument. Part of Greenbelt's success has been in getting away without being highlighted. People have not been sure who is in control of and provides the factoring for open spaces.

In my constituency, play parks are badly maintained, with dangerous objects such as broken glass, litter, large fallen trees, unfenced drainage ponds and so on in areas used by children. Many people in my constituency are withholding payment for non-delivery, and they have received threatening letters. I shall return to that, because it could be part of a court case. The company is systematically attempting to extract payment for services not rendered, and there are serious questions to answer about its practices and how much money it has obtained in that way.

Far and away the biggest complaint from home owners is that they cannot escape from that failing provider. The act of buying a home is locking people inescapably into a monopoly contract with a company, which contradicts the principles of competition and contractual and consumer law in this country.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I also have difficulties with the company in Bridge of Weir in my constituency where my constituents have suffered that sort of harassment. The fundamental problem is the company's lack of accountability, and the way in which prices are negotiated. People are happy to pay for the service if they can see what it is and what the charge is. As I understand it, the charges are non-negotiable.

Mr. Devine: My hon. Friend makes a relevant point. People are prepared to pay for the service, but they are paying up to £400 and not receiving a service. It is striking that one of his constituents on one of Greenbelt's estates received a letter on 12 July stating that they will not have to pay because of the disrepair of the estate, but that on 13 July another resident on the same estate was told that they must pay up. The company does not seem to know what it is doing.

Gordon Banks: Does my hon. Friend agree that companies such as Greenbelt should be obliged by legislation to provide an annual report to individual estates stating what it has done this year and what it is planning to do next year, so that residents have an idea of where the money is being spent, if indeed it is being spent?

Mr. Devine: That is an interesting point. I shall refer to the publicity on Greenbelt's website and its annual report later, when I shall return to my hon. Friend's point.

Willie Rennie (Dunfermline and West Fife) (LD) *rose—*

Mr. Devine: This like the black plague. I happily give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Willie Rennie: I, too, have problems with Greenbelt in my constituency, which has many new housing estates. I have been trying to deal with Greenbelt on a case-by-case basis and to get it to live up to its promises. Throughout, I have heard many commitments about communication which have never been followed through.

Today, I had a report from one of the estates saying that two children have been injured during the past week by a faulty piece of equipment that had been poorly maintained by Greenbelt. Does the hon. Gentleman think that councils should be encouraged to take back responsibility for the management of such estates, as well as new estates?

Mr. Devine: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who will be very helpful when we get to court, because Greenbelt is denying that any problems exist.

I want to speak about Greenbelt's chief executive. At two public meetings in my constituency recently, two directors of the company turned up—Alex Middleton and Richard Taylor. Alex Middleton was an interesting character. He did not like the fact that I described his company publicly as "Farepak for home owners", and he said that it was unacceptable for me to speak in the media or to raise the issue in this place. I had to explain to him that that was part of my job as a Member of Parliament.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I have had the privilege of working with my hon. Friend for a number of years and have always felt that he acted in an honourable manner, but I have received correspondence from Greenbelt which questions his balance. It says clearly that the early-day motion tabled by my hon. Friend contains a number of gross inaccuracies—for example, he said that Greenbelt serves 50,000 homes when it serves just over 18,000; he said that it holds 750 developments when it has only 241; he said that the cost for each property is about £180 when it is only £100. Will my hon. Friend comment on the fact that Greenbelt says that he is giving inaccurate information not only to his constituents but to the Members of this House who supported his early-day motion?

Mr. Devine: Coincidentally, I just happen to have Greenbelt's annual report. On the back are the statistics:

"Currently managing open space on behalf of 20,000 homeowners...A further 30,000 are contracted".

At the school that I went to, 20,000 and 30,000 made 50,000. Greenbelt goes on to say that it is

"responsible for approximately 750 development sites throughout the UK".

What is going on is a bullying strategy, which I will describe if hon. Members let me continue.

Alex Middleton made various comments telling me what I could and could not do. That is serious. At a public meeting, he said that the company had had problems with its subcontractors. In fact, this week's *Scotland on Sunday* reported that one of the company's directors said that there had been problems

"on some estates and that some subcontractors hired to carry out work had 'not been up to scratch'."

One might think that that is perfectly fair and reasonable—until one looks at the directorships held by Greenbelt directors. Alex Middleton holds 15, in Greenbelt Group Ltd, Greenbelt Energy Ltd and other companies. Greenbelt's main subcontractor is MG Contracting Ltd. Guess who the director of MG Contracting Ltd is? [Hon. Members: "Alex Middleton."] Quite correct.

The other director of Greenbelt is Anthony Burton. He holds 21 directorships, including various Greenbelt directorships. What do we find among them? MG Contracting Ltd. He is a director—a Greenbelt company is subcontracting to a company in which its directors hold shares. Mr. Richard Taylor holds 19 directorships—again, Greenbelt this and Greenbelt that. Guess what is among them? MG Contracting. The company clearly is Farepak for home owners.

I should like to address the serious bullying. One of my constituents, Paula Hoogerbrugge, set up a support group to help people affected by Greenbelt. She has now been in touch with more than 30 estates throughout the United Kingdom, from Inverness—the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander) wished to be here but, sadly, could not owing to other commitments—right down to Leeds. It is exactly the same story articulated by other hon. Members—money charged and service not given, threatening letters sent and the like.

What did Greenbelt do in response? First, it had its solicitors write to me:

"We are writing to you at this stage to draw these matters to your attention. You will no doubt give careful consideration to any comments which are made in relation to our clients and ensure that they are properly founded in fact."

That was on 11 July. They also wrote to Paula. I e-mailed them back and told them to withdraw their bullying letter to my constituent or I would raise the matter in the House of Commons. I mentioned the company during business questions on 12 July. Greenbelt then wrote to the Mr. Speaker in a clear attempt to silence me.

As they say in my part of the country, I am big and ugly enough to take on that sort of threat. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] Unanimous applause. But it is totally unacceptable to write a similar letter to my constituent. The letter is addressed to Paula and others—I am clearly one of the others—and complains about her press release. I place on record that not only did I see the press release in advance, but I amended it. I will address each of the allegations that Greenbelt made about Paula.

The letter reads:

"We are instructed by Greenbelt Group Ltd. We have been given sight of a press release which bears to be prepared and

presented by you entitled 'West Lothian politicians win praise for efforts to tackle land maintenance company'. The press release contains a number of statements and notes for editors. Our clients are concerned by a number of claims... Taken individually or together, they are clearly intended to damage the reputation and goodwill"

of the company.

"It is our understanding that you have distributed this press release. The gravity of this matter should not be underestimated. It is also clear that anyone who repeats any information which is not true or defamatory will also repeat the defamation complained of and will also be liable in damages.

The following examples have been extracted from your press release, although they do not represent all of the criticisms or complaints which our clients have in relation to your press release.

You allege that our clients are 'causing problems for thousands of landowners'."

We know that there are problems. There are problems in Inverness, Fife and right down to Leeds. The letter continues:

"You are asked to substantiate"

the problems

"and to identify the 'thousands of home owners' to whom you make reference.

It is stated in terms that Fergus Ewing",

a Scottish Executive Minister,

"is to investigate the company. That is not correct. Mr. Ewing is not carrying out an investigation into Greenbelt. This statement clearly seeks to imply some form of parliamentary or other investigation, which is not true."

Well, I have news for them. Here we are in Parliament, and today I wrote to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs to say that it should investigate the matter.

Greenbelt's solicitors continue:

"You state that our client takes ownership"

of land. The letter says that that is not correct, but it is absolute nonsense. That is exactly what Greenbelt does.

"Your press release makes reference to what you describe as an appalling level of service. This is not correct. Our clients have a significant level of communication".

We just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern) that Greenbelt admitted to him that it had only improved it, and Greenbelt's own director said in this week's *Scotland on Sunday* that

"in the past its communications with its customers had not been 'of the best'",

and that improvements were now being made.

The solicitor's letter continues:

"Your press release states that our clients are responsible for the management of 600 sites, which is factually incorrect. They manage 241 sites."

If Greenbelt manages 241 sites, why is it economical with the truth in its own report?

"You state that these 600 sites involve 36,000 residents... They involve 20,000 residents. These are wildly misleading statements and either are made without making the most basic checks on the factual situation or are made recklessly in an attempt to support or otherwise sensationalise an ill-founded set of allegations.

The press release further states that our clients ignore the bulk of their contractual obligations."

We have heard from hon. Members that that is exactly the problem with the company, yet it says that that is not the case. The letter goes on:

"The press release goes on to state that our clients perform the bare minimum".

I have heard constituents say at public meetings that they have been trying to contact the company for six years and have been ignored. A constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan) sent Greenbelt recorded delivery letters and eventually cut a bunch of weeds and went down to the head office. It is unbelievable. The letter continues:

"Furthermore, the press release goes on to state that the practices adopt by our clients are so poor"

that they pose risks to children and fire hazards. I welcomed the intervention of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Willie Rennie), because it showed that that is true.

The letter goes on:

"Finally, you make the allegation that our clients routinely send letters to non-paying customers telling them that their name will be added to a credit blacklist."

I have dozens of those letters here. The lawyers—I am sure that they are very good lawyers—go on to say:

"All of the above, either individually or taken together, constitute a serious and concerted attack on our clients...The gravity of this matter should not be underestimated by you. It is recommended you consult solicitors without further delay, and that you meantime desist from further utterances, whether written or spoken, where the intended effect is to further damage the reputation of those we represent."

That is outrageous. I was involved in the press release.

Let me tell hon. Members where the company crossed the line. Paula is a single mum who works for BT. The company's representatives contacted her employers behind her back in a clear attempt to have her either silenced or sacked. That is despicable bullying behaviour, which is why I am pleased to be here to condemn that group and its behaviour and to ensure that we consider appropriate legislation to rectify the situation.

It is totally unacceptable that a company can have a monopoly. Home owners cannot sack the company. Tomorrow, I shall write to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and to its English equivalent. I shall include in my letter the contributions from hon. Members in this debate and the file that we have on the company. I shall ask local authorities whether they really want to deal with a company that behaves in such a despicable manner.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Bridget Prentice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Devine), not only on securing this debate, but on the passionate way in which he has expressed his concerns on behalf of his constituents, not only today, but in business questions, in a question to the Prime Minister and elsewhere. His constituents can be assured that, in him, they have a true fighter for their cause.

The maintenance of open spaces and housing developments is an important issue, not only for the individual residents concerned, but for the environment.

[Bridget Prentice]

The deterioration of such open space has a detrimental effect both on the environment and on the value of individual homes.

According to my hon. Friend and to the company's report, which is where I got my information, the Greenbelt Group is involved in some 750 developments involving around 50,000 homes in the United Kingdom. Its activities, whether positive or negative, therefore impact on a large number of people in a number of ways, not least of which is the cost to individual home owners who have to pay for the upkeep of the open spaces. As my hon. Friend pointed out, those costs might well run into hundreds or thousands of pounds. He said that some of his constituents are being asked for up to £400 to pay for such maintenance. Companies that take on such work have an important role to play in the preservation of the quality of life and the value of the assets of the home owners on the estates. Where that relationship breaks down, a serious problem occurs.

My hon. Friend described how his constituents see the Greenbelt Group charging home owners for services that it either does not provide or provides very poorly. He went on, amusingly and wittily, to show that there are several limited companies within the group, which I understand are all registered in Scotland. I do not know whether he has had time to look at the website of the Greenbelt Group, which describes the company as

"the only UK-wide company that owns and manages greenbelt land formed as part of new housing developments",

which

"is now caring for more than 750 locations across the country. Its team of landscape professionals are experienced in managing environmental, horticultural, forestry, wildlife, drainage, play and leisure facilities. Greenbelt provides tailored plans for each location, giving customers the reassurance that their shared landscapes are managed and maintained in a way that will sustain the local environment, its attractiveness and the marketability of their area. Planning guidelines, new legislation and increasing concern to protect sensitive areas require local authorities to ensure that residential and commercial landscapes are properly planned, managed and maintained in a financially sustainable way. Greenbelt works actively with residential and commercial developers, to create landscapes that look good and suit local conditions. Greenbelt aims to grow its business and expand its range of services across the UK by working closely with customers, planners, developers and local communities."

I appreciate that that is probably not the language that my hon. Friend or his constituents would use, but it is the language that the Greenbelt Group uses on its website. As another avenue down which he could take his campaign, he may want to consider whether that is in breach of the rules of the Advertising Standards Authority.

In response to the comments that my hon. Friend made about the lawyer's letter to his constituent Paula, I say that those are serious allegations. His constituent is clearly a robust person, because she has been campaigning on the issue, but I can perfectly understand why she might be very concerned indeed about receiving such a letter. I suggest to him that he and his constituent take legal advice from a law centre or other such organisation to ensure that she is properly represented when responding to that level of intimidation, as he called it.

This issue clearly has particular impact in Scotland. I have been told that the Scottish Executive are looking into it, and that Fergus Ewing, Scotland's Minister for Community Safety, is taking up the matter. I hope that that is true. If it is not, I hope that my hon. Friend will ensure that Mr. Ewing takes forward the issue, because it has to be dealt with within the Scottish Executive. I also gently suggest to my hon. Friend that, when he is taking up the matter with the Scottish Executive, he might suggest to them that they look to England and Wales, where a better policy has been developed.

A few months ago, I dealt with claims management during the passage of what was to become the Compensation Act 2006. In that area, Scotland's system was better than that in England and Wales. On this issue, in a similar situation, exactly the reverse applies. In England and Wales, we now have commonhold, which is called the third way. It ensures that the community of owners on the estate owns the common parts and arranges for their maintenance. The division of ownership between home owners and the management company is therefore avoided. That system has not yet been widely adopted in England and Wales, but it represents a long-term solution to the problems of the maintenance of common facilities and open space on freehold estates. That is one of the reasons why the Government want to encourage its use.

Commonhold involves the creation of a limited company known as a commonhold association, so it might not suit some of the smaller estates. Nevertheless, I hope that my hon. Friend will consider whether it could be adopted in Scotland and that, if the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs decides to investigate the case, it might consider including that scheme in the recommendations that it makes.

Mr. David Hamilton: I recommend that, if the Scottish Affairs Committee looks into the matter, it also has discussions with Scottish Building Federation contractors, who give out the contracts when houses are to be built. Massive house building is taking place throughout Scotland, including in Midlothian. One of the issues that that has raised is the need for discussions with the federation, so that it can consider other opportunities for giving out contracts.

Bridget Prentice: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I hope that the Scottish Affairs Committee takes up that suggestion.

I should briefly like to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston that publicity, through TV and the media, is always a good way of bringing people to account. As well as going to the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Affairs Committee, I suggest that he might use the media and some of the consumer programmes on TV—

Janet Anderson (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Miscarriages of Justice

4.30 pm

Willie Rennie (Dunfermline and West Fife) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an important issue. I was inspired to seek this debate following the disappointing response that I received from the Prime Minister during Question Time a few weeks ago. In a moment, I shall explain why I believe that it was disappointing and why I believe that the Government have a moral duty to introduce a step change in the support provided to such victims of state action.

I understand that the responsibility for miscarriage of justice victims in Scotland lies primarily with the Scottish Executive, and I shall also take the issue up directly with them. However, I am raising the issue in this Chamber because I believe that the situation in the rest of the UK is equally unacceptable and that there should probably be joint action between the devolved Administrations of the UK and the UK Government.

Victims of miscarriages of justice are victims; just because they are victims of the state does not make them any less so. Yet the state and the public often consider them, at least in private, still guilty: "No smoke without fire," is often said. Why do we have such faith in the justice system when it finds people guilty, but not when it finds them innocent? Those are the fundamentals that result in the innocent being dumped in the street after years of state incarceration—no apology, little support and years upon years before they receive compensation.

My interest in after-care support was sparked by my constituent Steven Johnston, who was released from prison last year after 10 years behind bars. His murder conviction was quashed. Since then, despite some assistance from the council, he has received no specialist support, even though it is clear that he needs it. Such lack of support is not confined to Scotland. Gareth Pierce, the solicitor who represented the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six defendants, said:

> "They come out with no money and no counselling. They have no references, it is difficult to open a bank account, you can't get a mortgage. They have no GP. You don't belong."

Judith Ward, wrongly convicted of the M62 coach bombing, was refused a £5,000 bank loan while she waited for an interim compensation payment. Michael Hickey, one of the freed Bridgewater Three, told a court that he had stolen a ring from a Birmingham jeweller to highlight his case. He said:

> "I did it to say I've been given no money, nowhere to live, what am I supposed to do?"

Baroness Kennedy, who sits on the Government Benches in another place, described the situation as a "national disgrace". Adrian Grounds, senior lecturer in forensic psychiatry at Cambridge university's institute of criminology, is an authority on this issue. He has found that the wrongly convicted and their families commonly face psychological difficulties and problems of adjustment that are severe, bewildering and unexpected. For years, the wrongly convicted fight for freedom, but when it comes they are ill prepared. The outside world does not stop going round the sun while they are in prison. Parents, relatives and friends die—children grow up, people move on. To us, that sense of loss is often subtle, but to them it is shattering.

Victims often find it difficult to cope with day-to-day tasks such as sharing a home, shopping and even crossing the road. They feel stigmatised by neighbours and police. Even though they have been released, they are often regarded with suspicion. They feel bitterness at the fact that those who originally condemned them are now their neighbours. Their families feel it too; they become accustomed to the battle to release their loved ones, but after years without them they find it difficult to adjust to having them back in what has become their own home. The emotional experience of release is too much for many families—in fact, it is overwhelming. The families and victims feel that they are strangers to one another.

Adrian Grounds's study of the victims of miscarriages of justice found that psychiatric and psychological problems were common among them. Many of the wrongly convicted were described by friends and families as changed in personality. They became more withdrawn, mistrustful and estranged, and difficult to live with. Some had post-traumatic stress disorder, with symptoms such as nightmares and anxiety attacks relating to their prison experiences. Long-standing depression was common among them, and some used alcohol or drugs to try to reduce their feelings of distress.

Often the enormity of their personal losses was impossible to face and bear. In addition, some were consumed by anger and bitterness because it was impossible to accept the legitimacy of what had happened. There had usually been no apology, and those at fault in the prosecution had not been brought to justice. Dr. Grounds has examined Gerry Conlon of the Guildford Four and four members of the Birmingham Six. He found that they were suffering from persistent and disabling post-traumatic stress syndromes. They had irreversibly changed, and their difficulties in coping were similar to those described in clinical studies of war veterans. I am grateful for the work of Dr. Grounds and others; they have provided a great service to such victims—and also to the country, as it seeks an appropriate form of justice and support.

What form of support should be provided? I have four suggestions. First, before victims are released, they need information about the typical emotional and practical problems that can arise and about sources of advice and support.

Secondly, we need to set up a retreat, which victims could immediately access on release to give them time to acclimatise, obtain practical and professional help, and make arrangements for housing, health care and benefits. Owing to the relatively small numbers involved in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, perhaps there is an opportunity for the devolved Administrations and the UK Government to come together to fund such a place. In Scotland, the Miscarriages of Justice Organisation, or MOJO, has been campaigning to establish such a retreat to provide a residential base, when needed, for released, wrongfully convicted prisoners.

Thirdly, in the medium to long term the victims need ongoing support. Most professionals working in mental health services have little or no experience of work with wrongly convicted people and may therefore have difficulty in recognising and properly appreciating their complex problems. Furthermore, those who have

[Willie Rennie]

been wrongly convicted may have had bad experiences of psychiatric and psychological professionals in prison, and are likely to be generally mistrustful of the state authorities that have let them down. They may be particularly sensitive to any indication by a clinician that their experience is not understood. Those seeking help from doctors and local mental health services quickly become disillusioned because they feel that they have been patronised, or treated dismissively or inappropriately.

We need a UK-wide network of psychiatric specialists who are able to focus on the needs of that small but significant group of people. Such specialists must be fully funded and connected with local health and mental health professionals so that their service can be easily accessed. I suppose that it would be a bit like a managed clinical network, but it would need adequate funding to ensure that no barriers were put in the way of providing the service to victims, and that it did not rely only on the good will of those health professionals.

Fourthly, we need support for the families of the victims, as they often end up supporting many of the victims and having to cope with the new circumstance. In many ways, they will be the carers. They will need support to develop coping and caring mechanisms.

At this point, I want to praise the work of MOJO and MOJO Scotland, which I have already mentioned. They are passionate and caring. MOJO Scotland receives about £50,000 a year from the Scottish Executive to establish a helpline. I acknowledge that the Home Office also funds a small service run by the royal courts of justice citizens advice bureau in London to provide initial help and advice about housing and benefits after release. That is very welcome, but it is simply insufficient. The UK Government and the devolved Administrations should be joining forces to fund a retreat. The effort by MOJO Scotland to set up such a retreat is supported by a range of well-respected lawyers who have directly helped miscarriage of justice victims. Baroness Kennedy said:

"I know from my own clients who have walked free that the ordeal is not often over when they win an appeal. They find it so hard to rebuild their lives...It is such an important project."

Gareth Pierce wrote:

"Mojo is tackling, single-handedly, what should have been and should be a government responsibility."

Dan Norris (Wansdyke) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman started by saying that his remarks were not applicable equally across the whole UK, because it was the Scottish experience that he was talking about. Can he tell me whether things are happening in England to support victims that are better than in Scotland, and vice versa?

Willie Rennie: I have no evidence to suggest that things are any different north and south of the border. I actually think that the situation in Scotland is replicated elsewhere. Scotland has its own helpline, as does London, but I do not believe that there are any significant differences in the support provided for victims of miscarriages of justice, and that is what I want the Minister to address.

Michael Mansfield, QC, said that the fundraising scheme for the retreat was essential and Dr. Adrian Grounds, whom I referred to earlier, has also written to MOJO to give his support.

Throughout the UK, guilty inmates undergo a programme that includes phased release, counselling and assistance with employment, housing and benefits. Other than that provided by MOJO Scotland and the royal courts of justice citizens advice bureau, there is no other support for miscarriage of justice victims. The guilty often get better treatment than the innocent. So what has been the Government's response?

In 1998, the Home Secretary at the time, now the Secretary of State for Justice, rejected a call from the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), the former Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, for special measures to assist in the care of released miscarriage of justice victims. In his reply, the then Home Secretary said that medical or psychiatric care of any released prisoner was a matter for the NHS. He added:

"Probation services, on a voluntary basis and subject to the availability of resources...are able to help with resettlement problems experienced by released prisoners.

Thus I am not convinced that it would be necessary and right to set up a separate system to assess the needs for, and provide support and treatment to, those released following the quashing of their conviction after a long term of imprisonment."

Last week, the Prime Minister wrote to me after my question in the main Chamber. He explained about the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and that that

"places a duty on local authorities to make available 'advice, guidance and assistance' to people who request such a service within 12 months of their release from custody, including those released following an appeal against conviction and/or sentence."

He went on to outline the Scottish Executive's financial support for MOJO Scotland, for which it is grateful. However, all that is simply inadequate. We need more than "advice, guidance and assistance" and 12 months is far too long to wait.

I have explained Dr. Grounds' view that these individuals suffer a complexity of difficulties that in practice are not well met by mental health services. It is his view, and that of many others, that specialist support is required for that special group of prisoners. To expect them neatly to fit into the norms of society when they have been wrongly cooped up in prison for years is naive. Contrary to what the then Home Secretary said nine years ago, it is increasingly clear now, if it was not then, that we need a separate system of care and support.

There are parallels with the armed forces for establishing separate systems. For instance, at Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham there is a military-managed ward. In the Priory and Combat Stress, we have mental health support for servicemen and ex-servicemen suffering mental health difficulties. I believe that there is evidence to support the case for having a specialist system of support for miscarriage of justice victims. I believe the Government have a moral responsibility financially to support such a development.

Paddy Hill, one of the Birmingham Six, summed up the situation in his customary brutal manner:

"The authorities have a bottomless pit of money to fit you up and lock you up, but when you're found to be innocent the cash suddenly dries up."

No one can doubt Paddy's commitment to the cause. He is a leading member of MOJO Scotland and provides direct help to victims when they are released from prison. In fact, he has collected numerous people from the prison gates and put them up in his own home. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude, even more so because that should be responsibility of the state. The state has a moral obligation to establish the services that I have detailed this afternoon. Even though he cares passionately, it should not be up to Paddy Hill. No matter how much he knows about how to treat victims on release, he is not trained—he is not a psychiatrist. This is the responsibility of government. The state should clear up its own mess.

4.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Maria Eagle): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Willie Rennie) on securing today's debate on an important subject. He is aware—he made reference to this fact—that I cannot deal with matters of criminal justice north of the border up in Scotland. That is not my remit and is, as everyone in the Chamber knows, a devolved matter. I do not begin to explain or accept any responsibility for the rightful responsibility of the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament. However, he said correctly that there are some similarities between services that are available north and south of the border for the small number of people who, like some of the individuals whom he has mentioned, have been victims of miscarriages of justice.

Some of the people, individuals and cases to which the hon. Gentleman referred have been at the extreme end. They have spent many years wrongfully in prison. I accept that those who are found not to have committed the offences for which they were convicted and imprisoned, sometimes many years down the line, are, first and foremost, victims. It is as much a denial of justice when someone is locked up for something that they did not do as when someone is not locked up for something that they did do. Both are a matter of regret in respect of the operation of the criminal justice system, and I acknowledge that.

I agree that we must do all we can to ensure that victims of miscarriages of justice are supported. The hon. Gentleman used quotations from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice that go back nine years, and more recently there has been movement in what I hope that he would accept is the right direction. I detected a certain amount of acceptance that some developing services are available. The hon. Gentleman mentioned MOJO and arrangements north of the border. I heard what he said, but, of course, I am not responsible for what goes on in Scotland. There is a slightly different configuration of services in England and Wales that are covered by my Department. The hon. Gentleman made reference to, and quoted extensively from, the work of Adrian Grounds, who is recognised as an expert in this field.

We have a miscarriages of justice support service that operates in England and Wales, and Adrian Grounds is on the steering group to give his expert advice and support to us to ensure that we can fund a service that provides appropriate services for people who have suffered miscarriages of justice. Although I accept that there are miscarriages of justice, thankfully, in the vast majority of cases, the courts get it right. We are talking about a small number of cases, and some of those to which the hon. Gentleman referred are at the extreme end of the scale. They have spent many years in prison and, one might assume, are even more affected by their experience, as are their families, than those who have not spent so long there. A miscarriage of justice is a miscarriage of justice, but one might expect that things get worse the longer it goes on.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are arrangements through the courts and the Criminal Cases Review Commission to put right the wrong that is done, but he has concentrated much more on the impact on individuals and their families and friends of being released after having been locked up for all that time for something that they did not do.

I should like to say a little about the miscarriages of justice support service before moving on to address the points that the hon. Gentleman made. There was concern about the lack of support for appellants to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, and in January 2003 we established a pilot advisory service in the royal courts of justice, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. It covers England and Wales and is at arm's length from the Government, for obvious reasons. One would not wish it to be too close, given that it is the state that puts the people affected in the position that they find themselves in. It is, of course, funded with money from my Department, but it was set up at arm's length to assure those who might benefit from its services that the advice and support that they would get would have no implications for their cases, and would not be intended to prevent them from getting compensation or pursuing their cases in any way that they wished.

In January 2005, in light of the experience of that scheme, it was extended for three years. A contract to provide the service was awarded to the royal courts of justice's citizens advice bureau. There is provision in the current arrangements to extend it for a further two years by mutual agreement. In total the service covering England and Wales costs in the region of £133,000 a year. It helps appellants across England and Wales whose cases are referred by the CCRC or who are pursuing their own out-of-time appeals. It is aimed at the people whom the hon. Gentleman identified—the victims of big miscarriages of justice.

As he acknowledged, the number of people involved is small. In general terms, the service aims to ensure that victims of miscarriages of justice receive appropriate advice, guidance and support to move forward with their lives. Advice and support is offered at every stage of the process—from the pre-appeal hearing to the appeal itself and then afterwards, including as someone comes out of prison if their appeal succeeds.

There can be assistance with finding accommodation; establishing income; making claims for benefits; applying for national insurance credit; registering with a GP; accessing appropriate health care and counselling; opening a bank account and budgeting; family and relationship issues; employment and training needs; and finding a solicitor to deal with compensation claims. The hon. Gentleman mentioned specific cases from some years ago to explain the gap

[Maria Eagle]

that existed, and the service offered by the miscarriages of justice support service down at the royal courts is intended to plug that gap.

The service can also supply more specialist support, and so far this year seven clients have received assessments by a consultant forensic psychiatrist. The hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out the difficult mental health issues that can arise from miscarriages of justice, and he compared the problems experienced to trauma experienced by members of the armed services. The service has so far supported more than 100 people, and in the past 12 months 25 new cases have been taken on in the England and Wales service. In the three months between January and March, there were 51 active cases and 10 were closed, the work that was mutually decided on having been completed.

In recognition of some of the hon. Gentleman's points, I say that there is more support now than there used to be. He made a number of broad points, one of which was that before people come out of prison, having been locked up wrongly for a long time, it would be sensible for them to have information and guidance about the typical problems that they are likely to encounter and sources of support. We try to ensure in England and Wales, through the service that I have described, that such support is available both before an appeal is heard and after someone comes out of prison. Things are better now than they were back in 1998, when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice was Home Secretary and answered the question that the hon. Gentleman quoted.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the residential retreat, as he called it. There is currently no residential base in the UK specifically for the purpose. I also hear what he says about MOJO and other organisations that focus on the matter and their campaigns to obtain such a base. At present I know of no plans for any such arrangements, but I am certainly willing to listen to any arguments from him, MOJO or anyone else.

In England and Wales, the miscarriages of justice support service will reopen cases if problems re-emerge. If somebody stops getting assistance from it and then runs into problems, their case can be reopened and further support made available. The hon. Gentleman made the point that ongoing support was important, and one can see how that may well be the case. He also called for a UK-wide network of psychiatric experts, and the support service's steering group for England and Wales is considering what can be done to ensure proper availability of the level of psychiatric and forensic psychiatric help that victims of miscarriages of justice need. We are certainly considering the matter, but I can say no more about it at present because no decisions have been made. I heard what the hon. Gentleman said about funding.

On support for families, it is clearly important, when somebody has been separated from their family for so long, that that is an aspect of any support offered. Again in the context of England and Wales, the support service tries to provide support to rebuild family relationships when necessary. It often obtains forensic psychiatric support and an investigation of an individual's circumstances, gets recommendations about the support and perhaps family therapy that is needed and tries to ensure that it is available.

There is also indirect support to families via the support service, which does not just relate to the people who have been the direct victims of miscarriages of justice. If necessary, there is the possibility of referral to other support services in the communities where affected families live.

I heard what the hon. Gentleman said in praise of the work of MOJO, and I am happy to endorse it. I have not met MOJO, but I am sure that it does extremely valuable work in Scotland. I also heard what he said about the support that some well-known victims of miscarriages of justice have been providing and the work that they do. I am happy to say how important that is and congratulate those people, who have themselves suffered so much from miscarriages of justice.

I shall end by saying that I will be happy to consider the matter further with the hon. Gentleman if he wishes to write to me. I fully understand and support his argument for support services being available to the small number of people who suffer so much from miscarriages of justice as a result of the state intervening and the criminal justice system, for whatever reason, not working. I do not think that he and I are far apart in our analyses of the issue, so I hope that he will feel that the debate has been worth while. I am happy to consider any further points that he wishes to write to me on.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Five o'clock.